



LOCKDOWN HOMILIES

201 - 296



John Aitchison
Parish of St John the Divine
Glenwood, Durban

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Glenwood
Durban**

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Contents

Foreword – Edward French

A note from the writer – John Aitchison

The homilies

Year one of lockdown

#	Day	Date	Title
201	205	20201017	The happy martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch
202	206	20201018	Render unto Caesar
203	207	20201019	Ignatius of Antioch and the deacons
204	213	20201025	Corona virus fatigue
205	220	20201101	Halloween and All Saints
206	236	20201117	Mother Hilda
207	271	20201222	Every star shall sing a carol
208	279	20201230	“The party’s over”
209	280	20201231	The year is over – the baggage remains
210	281	20210101	The past and new year
211	282	20210102	On not waiting for the work to begin
212	283	20210103	On the virtue of patience
213	284	20210104	How long?
214	285	20210105	A person in whom there is no deceit
215	286	20210106	Epiphany
216	287	20210107	Resurgence
217	288	20210108	Re-capturing the city
218	289	20210109	Lies and gossip
219	290	20210110	Jesus is risen and Lord, joy is real!
220	291	20210111	The holy innocents
221	292	20210112	Listening to the President
222	293	20210113	The bigger picture
223	294	20210114	Sophia and Phronesis
224	295	20210115	This is that – rebellion, fiery serpents and God’s love
225	307	20210127	The Nicene Creed (Part 1)
226	308	20210128	The Nicene Creed (Part 2)
227	309	20210129	The Nicene Creed (Part 3)
228	310	20210130	The Nicene Creed (Part 4)
229	311	20210131	The Nicene Creed (Part 5)
230	312	20210201	The Nicene Creed (Part 6)
231	313	20210202	The Nicene Creed (Part 7)
232	332	20210221	The Rainbow hope
233	335	20210224	Silence
234	356	20210317	Keeping going
235	360	20210321	Priests of creation

Year two of lockdown

#	Day	Date	Title
236	1	20210327	A year of lockdown
237	67	20210601	Justin martyr
238	68	20210602	Those who are falsely accused
239	69	20210603	Don't do that
240	70	20210604	Trains and mad drivers
241	71	20210605	Boniface and the oak tree
242	72	20210606	Daimons and the family
243	73	20210607	Boniface writes on leadership
244	74	20210608	Third waves
245	75	20210609	Columba of Iona
246	79	20210613	Astonishment
247	80	20210614	Basil and his companions
248	81	20210615	Cutting down trees
249	82	20210616	The Church growing trees
250	84	20210618	Bernard Mizeki
251	93	20210627	Interruption
252	94	20210628	Saint Irenaeus and the three pillars of faith
253	95	20210629	Second shots
254	96	20210630	Ever-defeated, never subdued
255	97	20210701	Fantasies
256	98	20210702	The authority to forgive
257	99	20210703	Death and grief in the time of Covid-19
258	100	20210704	Christ the Tiger
259	101	20210705	It goes on
260	103	20210707	X
261	104	20210708	The A to Z
262	105	20210709	Four million
263	106	20210710	A sublime hymn of praise
264	107	20210711	Three words
265	108	20210712	Being re-headed
266	109	20210713	Looting
267	110	20210714	The day after
268	111	20210715	A time of panic, despair and hope
269	112	20210716	Being vigilant
270	113	20210717	Cleaning up
271	114	20210718	Keep your eye on the prize
272	115	20210719	Mandela Day
273	116	20210720	Jesus' mother and brothers
274	117	20210721	Little things
275	118	20210722	The diaconate of all believers
276	119	20210723	Stressed out
277	120	20210724	Citizen duty

278	121	20210725	Citizen duty in a world of powers
279	122	20210726	A basic right
280	123	20210727	Do we need a sabbath?
281	124	20210728	Provision is made
282	125	20210729	Providing bread
283	126	20210730	Marthas in action
284	130	20210803	St Stephen – deacon
285	131	20200804	Worship and service
286	132	20210805	Diaconal service and service by deacons
287	133	20210806	Worshipful service
288	137	20210810	St Laurence – the comedian
289	162	20210904	No eternal lockdown
290	185	20210927	The meaning of words – <i>diakonia</i>
291	224	20211105	Reconsidering Acts 6
292	233	20211114	The Word and social media
293	242	20211123	Christ the king
294	260	20211211	Living with Covid
295	359	20220320	Mourners and the meek

Year three of lockdown

#	Day	Date	Title
296	09	20220404	End of the disaster

The illustrations

Year one of lockdown

Day Illustration

- 205 Martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch
- 206 Roman coin with head of Caesar Augustus
- 236 Statue of Hilda
Remains of the abbey at Whitby
- 280 Painting by William Blake of Christian Reading in his Book
- 286 The magi adoring the Christ child – Stained glass window at St John the Divine

Year two of lockdown

Day Illustration

- 1 The author on the roof of his block of flats during an electricity blackout
- 68 St Pothinus and St Blandina
- 71 St Boniface and the oak tree
- 75 St Columba
The Abbey of Iona
- 80 St Basil
- 82 An Ethiopian church surrounded by forest trees
- 84 Bernard Mizeki
- 104 Greek alphabet and symbols
- 115 Nelson Mandela and John Aitchison
- 126 Martha and Mary – stained glass, St John the Divine
- 130 St Stephen martyr (ikon)
St Stephen being stoned, stained glass window
- 137 St Laurence before the Roman Prefect
St Laurence assisting the poor and crippled

Foreword

Edward French

It is 14 June 2022. Last Sunday we celebrated the Holy Trinity. So one thinks readily of interlinking triads when framing our experience. Reflecting on John Aitchison's amazing homilies written during lockdown, it seems to me that his strength lies in the embodiment of three interlinked concerns:

1. Radical critique of our society and our world, with a focus on its false pressures and foolish policies
2. A deep humanity and humility before the suffering of humankind, which turns the radical critique towards possible but not facile sources of hope
3. A delight in the traditional church, its saints, its symbolism in multiple physical forms, its liturgy, the long historical reach and continuing relevance of its teaching – plus a rich vein of cultural reference.

These three could be seen as aspects of the Holy Spirit, the Son, and the Father – the Rock of Ages. Like a Holy Family, these don't interlink seamlessly. Spiritual growth often comes from coming to terms with the tough questions and paradoxes of trying to act in the light of all three. Love, Power and Justice don't offer easy matches for mere mortals.

John's writing in his homilies was directed in the first place at making up for the loss of dialogue and intimate guidance after the church had to end physical interaction because of the Covid-19 epidemic. The writing was intended for his own congregation, but soon reached out across the internet to many others who felt stimulated and refreshed by his daily offerings. Not least of the refreshment came from the extraordinary energy expressed in writing a new message day after day without fail, and without any loss of quality in writing and thought.

In the first set, John focussed on many of the problems and anxieties posed by the pandemic and being locked down. To remind people of the space that was waiting to be occupied again he drew on the fabric of his parish church – St John the Divine in Durban – its symbolic forms, and particularly its distinguished stained-glass windows and their saints. In this second set he wisely cut back production to regular but more occasional messages. A major subset of the homilies deals with saints and holy days. The heroic spiritual and moral courage of the saints gave us courage and fortitude before the tribulations of the time: the seemingly unending lockdown, quibbles about vaccination, the horror of late Trumpian post-truth twittering, and then the gross breakdown of our faltering social order in the riots and looting of July 2021. About the latter, my emailed response to John reads, "Your homilies this week have been the best resource for perspective, clarity, sanity and charity – more than any of the other commentary I've seen. Thank you."

Throughout the series, John received appreciative feedback. Nearly always, that his homilies were brilliant, wonderful, so encouraging and insight-giving.

Today in *Maverick Citizen* a young activist and analyst explains her feelings towards the future in a way that resonates with John's homilies: "You can have pessimism of the intellect - so you can read up all the statistics, you can see all the structural fractures and everything - but you can still act in a way that brings about change. So, you can have optimism in your actions." (Fentse Malatji, aged 23).

I have known John for 43 years now as an associate in the promotion of adult education. John was Professor of Education at the university in Pietermaritzburg, where he initiated and sustained many years of research, teaching and activism. While I knew of his background in theology, and that he occasionally delivered a sermon, I had no idea of the intensity, steadiness and intellectual depth of his faith. So his homilies came as a revelation.

In John's 252nd homily, these words that he writes about St Irenaeus make a rather good account of John himself:

Irenaeus' powerful critique of gnosticism with its aristocratic knowledge for an elite is based upon his faith in the unity and goodness of God, that the incarnation of God in the created material world is what restores humanity, and that faith and loving ethical action in the world is necessary. He was excited by the beauty of God, truth and right action in the created world and in the hope of salvation for all.

A note from the writer

John Aitchison

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

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

Those readers who would like an initial take on what my idea of a homily is, should, look at the Day 100 homily in the first set of 200 homilies.

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

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

The happy martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch

Today is the feast day of Ignatius an early bishop of Antioch in Syria.

After his arrest he was sent to Rome, where he was martyred. While en route to Rome he wrote a series of letters which are fascinating examples of early Christian teaching about the Church, the sacraments, and the role of bishops, presbyters and deacons.

Not much is know about his early life. It is said Ignatius converted to Christianity at a young age. Tradition identifies Ignatius, along with his friend Polycarp, as disciples of John the Apostle.

We do not know why he was arrested, but Ignatius ended up being transported in chains to Rome in the custody of ten Roman soldiers whom he described as “beasts”, “ten leopards”. Why he was sent to Rome and not executed in Antioch is unclear, it may be that he was sent as an offering for the murderous games in the Colosseum or that the Governor was away from Syria at the time.

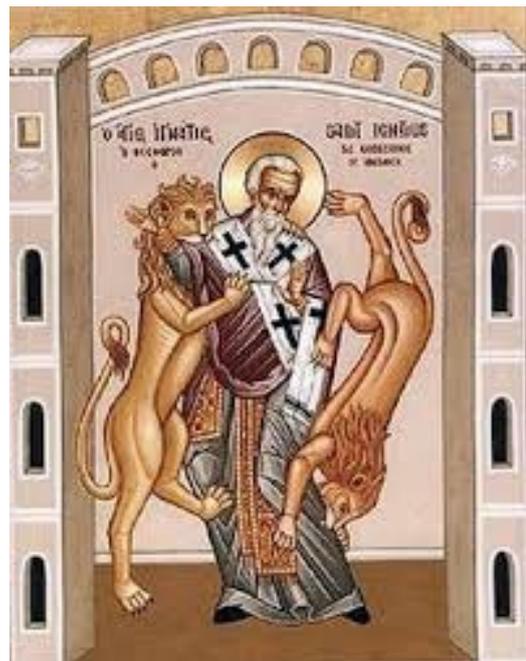
Fortuitously, the military convoy had much other state business and visited a number of places. So Ignatius ended up having a kind of *grand Road to martyrdom* tour, meeting Christians at all the different cities en route (in Philadelphia the entire congregation came to meet him) and he was able to send out seven letters via messengers.

Ignatius believed he would be thrown to the beasts in the Colosseum and he was indeed martyred. We are not sure when – probably around 110 AD

Ignatius did not want to escape martyrdom. He expressed a strong desire for bloody martyrdom in the arena and this may seem quite odd to the modern reader. He regarded being saved as setting one free from the powerful fear of death and thus able to bravely face anything. As Jesus had been martyred surely Christians should not fear the same fate.

In his letter addressed to the Christians of Rome, he entreats them to do nothing to prevent his martyrdom. Ignatius saw it as a problem that interfering Christians would try to get him saved.

“I fear your kindness, which may harm me. You may be able to achieve what you plan. But if you pay no heed to my request, it will be very difficult for me to attain unto God.” If Christians really wanted to do something, they should pray that he would remain faithful. “If you remain silent about me, I shall become a word of God. But if you allow yourselves to be swayed by the love in which you hold my flesh, I shall again be no more than a human voice.”



For Ignatius the desire to be a martyr was that to be a perfect disciple of Christ he should imitate Christ in his Passion, share in it, and be united with Christ in suffering. He felt that on his long journey to Rome he “begins to be a disciple”. It was not that he did not fear death and he asks the churches he wrote to that they pray for his strength and constancy.

He wrote to the Church in Rome:

I write to the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God, unless you hinder me. I beseech of you not to show an unseasonable good-will towards me. Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb, and may leave nothing of my body; so that when I have fallen asleep, I may be no trouble to any one. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not see so much as my body. Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice to God. I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles; I am but a condemned man: they were free, while I am, even until now, a servant. But when I suffer, I shall be the freed-man of Jesus, and shall rise again emancipated in Him. And now, being a prisoner, I learn not to desire anything worldly or vain.

For most of us martyrdom for the faith is an incredibly remote possibility (though there are millions of Christians still being persecuted to this day and in the last century more Christians were martyred than the cumulative toll of all the previous centuries). But something we can look at is how often we discourage others who are willing to make brave stands. And how often do we encourage ourselves not to “rock the boat” or upset important others about matters of truth or justice? St Ignatius has something to say to us after all.

Prayer

St Ignatius' prayer

I am the wheat of God,
and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts,
that I may be found the pure bread of God.
I long after the Lord,
the Son of the true God and Father, Jesus Christ.
Him I seek, who died for us and rose again.
I am eager to die for the sake of Christ.
My love has been crucified,
and there is no fire in me that loves anything.
But there is living water springing up in me,
and it says to me inwardly:
"Come to the Father."

Render unto Caesar

We are probably all fairly familiar with the Jesus' saying "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's".

Unfortunately this saying has been subject to much misinterpretation.

Its original context is very clear in the parallel passages In Matthew 22:15-23, Mark 12:13-17 and Luke 20:20-26:

Judaea is a colony under the rule of the Roman emperor, Caesar Tiberius, with some powers given to a puppet king, a Herod, and the local government/religious authorities in Jerusalem. The Romans ruthlessly wipe out any threat to their rule. The collaborationist Jewish authorities don't want their limited privileges threatened. [People who lived through the last days of apartheid, "homelands" leaders, the security police and spies would be very familiar with that kind of environment.]

Although the religiously correct Pharisees despise the Herodians, these two group come together to try to trap Jesus into saying something subversive, that would force the Romans to take action and eliminate him. Luke bluntly says they sent "agents" to trap Jesus and their purpose was to "deliver him to the jurisdiction and authority of the Governor" (that is, to Pilate – the man responsible for the collection of taxes in Judaea).

First they try to get Jesus to drop his guard by saying they know he is sincere and truthful and impartial. They then ask him the loaded question of whether it is lawful to pay tax to the Roman Caesar. He sees through their deviousness and malice. He calls them *hypocrites*, which meant someone who deceives or is putting on a performance to impress or fool others.

He then asks them to show him a coin and they show him a Roman denarius with the emperor's image on it. They acknowledge that it is an image of the Caesar, thus also acknowledging that they themselves are carrying this pagan Roman coin!

Jesus' answer "Give therefore to the Caesar the things that are the Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" stuns them. First, now they cannot say that Jesus told them to refuse to pay taxes and get him arrested. Second, they cannot accuse Jesus of being a sellout because what he says is that the Caesar can only have what is already his. And Jesus proclaims that all things that are God's, the whole of creation, belong to God.



This saying of Jesus has had profound impact on how people worldwide have come to view society and government. It led to the idea that there should be a separation between religious organisations and governmental authority. Nowadays a majority of modern national states have various degrees of formal separation of religious bodies and the state. In the ancient world this idea was almost inconceivable. One of the reasons the early Christians were persecuted is that they would not worship idols or the Emperor and this was taken as rebellion against the pagan Roman state, in which government and pagan religion were bound together.

But how do we, today, learn from what Jesus said?

Some interpretations of his words have far too literally and mechanically proposed the idea that there are two kingdoms – the kingdom of the state and the kingdom of God – and that we can obey totally different rules in each. This too easily degenerates into the idea that, when we operate in Caesar's world, injustice and exploitation and profiteering are OK because, well, that is what it is like in Caesar's world. It is what it is. The flip side of this is that because the Church is separate from that world it must never become involved in its politics or economics. As Caesars' world grows bigger and bigger – think of how government and business are intertwined – that leaves only private piety and church services as what is left to God!

But Jesus did not say "Give to Caesar what is his and what is left over you can give to religion, to the church". If we use "render unto Caesar" as an excuse to keep God out of huge parts of our life, then we have missed the whole point of what Jesus said.

Certainly we must respect legitimate state authority and give it what it needs for its effective working (and that means paying taxes properly and fully). Jesus' antagonists, by producing the coin, admitted that they were already under the earthly rule of the Roman empire. We also are under government rule (even though in a democracy we are in theory our own governors) and we take advantages of the benefits of being in a governed country. The way we live now means that already we have run up a debt to Caesar.

But Jesus' final word is to give God what is God's – and that is everything. Nothing is outside the reign of God. Our bodies and souls are God's, as is our world, its peoples and the way we live and treat others. We can give what is due to governments and other legitimate earthly institutions. But we cannot and must never give to them obedience that contradicts God's word and his command that his will be done on earth.

So we might still be able to ask searching questions such as what was the human cost in poverty and misery of the Emperor Tiberius having accumulated his own personal hoard of 750 million denarii (which we would today value at about 25 billion rands (1 500 million US dollars)).

Prayer

O Holy Father, who created a universe
and commanded us to live in it aright;
we acknowledge that all belongs to you
and our use of earthly things comes as your gift.

May we give to you, what is yours, our bodies and souls
and our activities on your earth.

May we be good citizens of your world
and be responsible and caring for all

May we care for the land in which we live
the waters from which we drink
and the air that we breathe.

Protect us from allowing our faith to give you Lordship
only of a small religious compartment of our lives.

All this we ask through your Son, Jesus the Christ
who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
over all worlds and ages.

Amen

Ignatius of Antioch and the deacons

Ignatius, in chains on his round trip of the Roman empire and on his way to martyrdom in Rome, wrote seven letters which give us glimpses of the teaching of the early church probably less than fifty years after the deaths of Paul and Peter. They give us a striking picture of an elderly Syrian bishop from Antioch, making his triumphal journey in chains from Antioch to the capital city.

In one of the cities en route, Smyrna, he was met by Bishop Polycarp and church delegates from all the nearby cities. There together with the help of the deacon Burrhus, who had come from Ephesus, he wrote letters to the churches of Ephesus, Tralles, Magnesia, and Rome. Later in Philippi in Macedonia he wrote three more letters, to Philadelphia, to Smyrna, and to Bishop Polycarp, the last one written a few weeks before his execution in Rome.

In these letters we find some of the earliest references to things we now take for granted – such as the centrality of the Eucharist, Sunday as a replacement of the Sabbath, and the term “catholic” applied to the Church.

He stressed the value of the Eucharist, calling it the “medicine of immortality” (Ignatius’ Letter to the Ephesians 20).

He is the first writer known to argue in favour of Christianity's replacement of the Sabbath with the Lord’s Day (Letter to the Magnesians 9):

Let us therefore no longer keep the Sabbath after the Jewish manner, ... let every friend of Christ keep the Lord’s day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days of the week. Looking forward to this, the prophet declared, “To the end, for the eighth day,” on which our life both sprang up again, and the victory over death was obtained in Christ.

He is also the first person known to use the Greek word “*katholikos*”, meaning “universal”, “complete” and “whole”, to describe the Church. When Ignatius wrote to the church in Smyrna and used the word “catholic”, he used it as if it were a word already in use to describe the Church.

His letters also serve to record the rapid development of a stable threefold church hierarchy. Ignatius is the earliest known Christian writer to emphasize loyalty to a single bishop in each city (or diocese) who is assisted by both presbyters (priests) and deacons. The first Christian writings other than the New Testament had only mentioned either bishops (overseers) or presbyters (elders). Indeed for Ignatius, having this three fold ministry was a sign of the Church: “Apart from these, there is no Church”.

Ignatius placed enormous value on the role of the deacons. In his Letter to the Trallians (3) he says “let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ”.

Until fairly recently, in Western Christianity the idea of the deacon as a separate order of ministry had largely disappeared – a “deacon” had *de facto* become simply a priest in his internship year. But from what Ignatius tells us we can get a sense of their powerful independent role in the early church.

For instance, Ignatius writes on bishops, presbyters and deacons (Letter to the Magnesians 6):

Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest.

From this we can get a sense of what function each of the leadership roles involved.

- ▶ The bishop was clearly the presider over the church in a particular place, the “spiritual crown of your presbytery”.
- ▶ The presbyters, the elders, were the council of senior people in the church.
- ▶ The deacons are “entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ”.

Now what does that “entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ” mean? Well we know what Jesus said about his business, his ministry of service (*diakonia*) (Luke 22:27; John 13:13-14):

Yet I am in your midst as one serving.

So if I, the Lord and the teacher, have washed your feet, you are obliged to wash one another’s feet; For I have given you an example so that, just as I have done for you, you may do as well.

The deacons were the people who most directly heard the concerns of the people of the Church and community and could inform the Bishop of what was needed – for relief for the poor, taking the sacrament to the sick and imprisoned, raising money to pay for relief, being the lookouts during times of persecution and, even at times, acting as the bodyguards of the Bishop in danger from pagan mobs. There were both male and female deacons and the latter had a particular ministry to women who might never be able to leave their homesteads. They had an important liturgical role in the Eucharist and in Baptism.

Ignatius speaks of two deacons, Burrhus and Sotio as being his fellow-servants and of another, Philo of Cilicia, “a man of reputation, who still ministers to me in the word of God”. In his Letter to the Magnesians (2) he talks:

of my fellow slave, the deacon Zotion. I am delighted with him, because he submits to the bishop as to God’s grace, and to the presbytery as to the law of Jesus Christ.

and continues (10) with the suggestion that the church in Antioch (where he had been Bishop) “elect a deacon to act as an ambassador of God” to the church in Philadelphia and says:

Blessed is he in Jesus Christ, who shall be deemed worthy of such a ministry.

In these days of the pandemic, when the lockdown has thrown into relief the inadequacies of our traditional forms of ministries – a distant bishop and a single overworked presbyter (priest) – a reconsideration is needed of how the threefold ministry can be re-energised for the future.

Prayer (Traditional Catholic prayer (adapted))

St Ignatius, you are one of the Fathers of the Church;
pray for her now as she gears up for her final battle.
St Ignatius, you were a kind and tender bishop;
pray for all presbyters and deacons,
that they may draw people ever more closer to Christ
by exemplifying his mercy and goodness.
St Ignatius, you were not afraid to die as a martyr for our Lord;
pray for all those who are dying this day.
Amen.

Corona virus fatigue

It is an old adage that more people are killed climbing down a mountain than climbing up. As a long distance runner I know from bitter experience that the last quarter of the race is far worse than all the previous kilometres combined. You think that the hardest part is over, you are fatigued and you are less alert. It can be a fatal combination. And, of course, there are those spectators yelling, "You are almost there!", "Only one more hill!", when, subjectively, given one's fatigue, it feels like the start of the Himalayas is before you.

This last week newspapers and the media started talking about Corona virus fatigue. It may initially have been prompted by Donald Trump saying that everybody was tired of the virus and, yet again, that it was going away soon. A recent South Africa a research survey showed that people were also experiencing this "fatigue" and becoming accordingly sloppy in their behaviour to avoid infection. This was predictable enough – with enough time most people become a bit more blasé about any threat. We are indeed tired and mentally exhausted by the lockdowns, however reduced they are now. Which is why it is such a dangerous time.

We also have to be concerned about the messages we receive from the people yelling that it is all nearly over and that we should now rely on "herd immunity" and end all lockdown restrictions. This so called herd immunity is usually called for by right-wing populist politicians – Trump, Johnson, and Bolsonaro and the business community they represent – who want society to get back to its business of making money for the super-rich. The concept of herd immunity is a scientific one and quite simple to comprehend. If enough of a herd of animals get infected and survive then new cases of infections will drop as there is less likelihood of an infectious animal coming into contact with a non-immune animal. Unfortunately there is a catch. The percentage of the herd required to be immune is high (it varies according to the disease) but in the case of Covid-19 it is about 70%, for measles about 95%. What that means is quite simple if we take the case of the United States of America. There, the lockdown was weak in many places and flouted by Trump supporters and others and the death toll is currently a quarter of a million people. But if there had been no behavioural change at all, no partial lockdown, and a reliance placed instead on herd immunity, the death toll would have been from a million to two million human lives. Yes, herd immunity works, at a terrible cost in lives.

The linguist scholar Noam Chomsky put it more bluntly:

I don't know what word in the English language – I can't find one – applies to people who are willing to sacrifice the literal existence of organized human life so they can put a few more dollars into highly stuffed pockets. The word 'evil' doesn't even begin to approach it.

So where do we go from here, as in countries around the world that listened to the herd immunity people and the anti-lockdownists are now entering their second or third waves of the pandemic? Last week in the United Kingdom much of the country had to close the pubs and restaurants that had been prematurely reopened.

What do we do? Like any climber or ultra trail runner we have to be more careful, more alert. We have to be more courageous and stronger in our ability to resist the temptation to relax and fit in with the risky behaviour that our friends and neighbours are increasingly indulging in.

There is a word from the Lord on this. Jeremiah had complained to God, (Jeremiah 12:1-2):

You will be in the right, O LORD,
when I lay charges against you;
but let me put my case to you.
Why does the way of the guilty prosper?
Why do all who are treacherous thrive?
You plant them and they take root;
they grow and bring forth fruit;
you are near to their mouths
yet far from their hearts.

One cannot but think of the tenderpreneurs and officials who stole millions in procuring masks and equipment in South Africa.

God replies to Jeremiah (12:5) and it is a tough message:

If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you,
How will you compete with horses?
And if in a safe land you fall down,
how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan?

Simply, when the going gets tough the tough must toughen up.

Paul also uses race imagery (1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 2:2-5):

Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.

Share in suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. ... And in the case of an athlete, no one is crowned without competing according to the rules.

Finally, Hebrews 12:1-2:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Prayer

Lord we have been through a lot and we are really tired,
help us to keep going.

Lord we were not ready for this endurance race,
and we are confused by the voices shouting out advice to us.

May we keep hope alive in our hearts that one day this will be over.
But ready us to endure and to give comfort to others in the present.

Give us the strength to stay alert and to resist risky behaviour and folly.
May we be prepared to take our share of hardship
as true followers of Jesus the Christ,
who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
over all worlds and ages.

Amen

Halloween and All Saints

Thousands of people may be dying daily of the virus in the Western world but last night, millions of children were dressing up for a macabre sugar-laden rite of death. It is called Halloween in the popular media and it shows that people can be persuaded to do almost anything if there is enough pressure from those who make money from it. In the United States of America, 25 percent of annual sweet (candy) sales are made for Halloween. Commercialising Christmas and Easter was not enough, so another, and in this case, thoroughly bogus festival was created.

Halloween (a contraction of Hallows' Evening, that is, All Saints Evening), is a Christian celebration originally observed in many European countries on 31 October, the day before the feast of All Saints Day. It begins the three-day observance of Allhallowtide, the time in the liturgical year dedicated to remembering the dead, including All Saints and Martyrs (1 November) and the Commemoration of All Souls (the Faithful Departed) (2 November).

It was first officially introduced in the year AD 609, but was originally celebrated on 13 May (and on 20 April in Ireland). In 835 the date was switched to 1 November under German influence. In the 11th century, 2 November became established as All Souls' Day.

There is a huge amount of popular nonsense saying that it was a Christianization of an Irish pagan celebration of Samhain (Summer's End), supposedly a festival of the dead or a beginning of the year. What archaeologists and historians know of Samhain is very little except that it was certainly a harvest festival at the beginning of Winter and had nothing at all to do with the dead or the new year.

Most of the modern North American secular customs of Halloween were influenced by mistaken ideas popularised by the modern and Romantic era "rediscovery" (or more accurately the outright forgery) of national Irish and Scottish "epics" or mythological texts for political purposes. Nowadays of course Halloween is just another big commercial orgy – selling sweets and costumes, masks, hats and pumpkins. It has, of course, a certain element of scary fun for children.

But it remains a travesty of the real purpose of Allhallowtide for it not only obscures the purpose of the festival, but sends out decidedly wrong messages, particularly to young children.

It gets three things decidedly wrong:

First, it propagates the idea of death as macabre, spooky, abnormal. In modern western industrial and urban society, which has already sanitised death almost out of existence and made it a taboo subject, children are no longer growing up with any real appreciation of the reality of death (this of course is not so in South Africa for the majority of people).

Second, it negates the good news that in Christ all evil powers have been dethroned. The dark things of evil and sorcery are no threat to the faithful.

Third, it detracts from the contemplation of the reality that we are part of a long chain of ancestors and people of the past, that, as Hebrews 12:1 puts it, we are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses”. The Body of Christ in which we are redeemed includes those who are, in this physical world, the dead. But Christ is not divided into two bodies. He holds us all together, living and dead, in one communion of the saints. We are with them and they are with us. We need to be close to them, not alienated from them by false ideas of the dangerous dead. It removes the incentive to pray for the dead, the argument for which was well presented by writer C.S. Lewis:

Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter me. And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age, the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to him?

Prayers

(Church of England)

Almighty and eternal God,
from whose love in Christ we cannot be parted,
either by death or life:
hear our prayers and thanksgivings
for all whom we remember this day;
fulfil in them the purpose of your love;
and bring us all, with them, to your eternal joy;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Genevieve Jordan Laskey)

Merciful Father,

On this day, we are called to remember those who have died,
Particularly those who have died in the past year,
And pray for their joyful reunion with you, their loving creator.
As your son taught us to call the stranger
neighbour, our fallen are many—

Names we will never know,
Voices we have never heard,
In lands we may never visit,
Yet brothers and sisters all.
And so we pray.

For victims of war, caught in the crossfires of
conflicts we could not quell,
for soldiers and civilians,
adults and children, we pray ...
Grant eternal rest, O Lord.

For those migrants who have died seeking a
haven where they hoped to find safety
and opportunity for themselves and for their families, we pray ...
Grant eternal rest, O Lord.

For victims of hunger, denied their share in the
bounty you have placed before us, we pray ...
Grant eternal rest, O Lord.

For victims of Covid-19, AIDS, Malaria, Ebola, and other infectious diseases,
who died before adequate care could reach them, we pray ...
Grant eternal rest, O Lord.

For those refugees seeking asylum from war,
who died in a land that was not their home, we pray ...
Grant eternal rest, O Lord.

For victims of emergencies and calamities everywhere,
who died amid chaos and confusion, we pray ...
Grant eternal rest, O Lord.

Lord, as you command, we reach out to the fallen.
We call on you on behalf of those we could not reach this year.
You raised your son from the dead
that all may share in his joyful resurrection.

In Jesus' name, we pray ...

Rest eternal grant them, Lord
And light perpetual shine on them.
May they rest in peace.

Amen.

Mother Hilda



Of famous Christian women leaders, St Hilda, whose feast is today, is one of the most renowned.

Hilda was born in 614 into a royal North of England family, and, after her father was murdered, brought up in the family of King Edwin, who created the Kingdom of Northumbria in 616. Through the influence of the widowed Edwin's new wife, who was a Christian, in 627 Edwin was baptised along with his entire court, including Hilda, aged 13.

Edwin was killed in battle in 633 and the Queen and her followers returned to her birthplace and founded an abbey. Later, Hilda's widowed elder sister became a nun in Gaul and Hilda decided to join her but, now at the age of 33, decided instead to answer a call from Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne Island, where there was a monastic community, to come back to Northumbria as a nun.

Within a year she was appointed as Abbess at Hartlepool Abbey. Ten years later she founded a new Abbey at Whitby. It was a double monastery, men and women living separately but worshipping together, and built in the Celtic (Irish) style with the people living in small houses, each for two or three people.

The original ideals of monasticism were maintained strictly in Hilda's abbey. All property and goods were held in common; Christian virtues were exercised, especially peace and charity. Everyone had to study the Bible and do good works. Five men from this monastery later became bishops.

The historian of the Church in England, Bede, described her as having enormous energy, intellectual brilliance, being a skilled administrator, and manager of the farming and timber growing of the Abbey. She was regularly asked to provide advice to kings and princes. She also had great concern for common people and, for example, encouraged a young Abbey cattle herder, Caedmon, in his poetry making.

Hilda is perhaps best known for the famous Synod of Whitby held in 664, the first one held in Northumbria. The task of the Synod was to resolve the clash between the way the Irish Christians (who have been the missionaries to Scotland and the north of England) dated Easter and performed other liturgical practices and the way the Christians further south in England did (following the practices of the Church of Rome). The majority accepted the Roman practice and this led to the unification of the Church in England (though many of the Irish missionaries were not happy and eventually returned to Ireland).

Hilda died at the age of 66 in AD 680.

As early as the 8th century she was venerated as a saint. She had helped ensure that northern England remained Christian. Hilda is considered one of the patron saints of learning and culture, including poetry, due to her patronage of Cædmon. St. Hilda has become the patron of many schools and colleges all over the world.

The original buildings at Whitby were destroyed by Viking raiders in 867 but it was later rebuilt and lasted until King Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries. Only ruins now remain.

St Hilda is generally depicted with a pastoral staff and carrying an abbey church. Often, there are ammonites at her feet (these fossils are common in the cliffs at the seashore in the Whitby area) – legend has it that she turned snakes into stone!

A community of Anglican sisters, the Order of the Holy Paraclete was founded in 1915 at St Hilda's Priory, on the western edge of Whitby town and more recently, the Community of St Aidan and St Hilda has been founded on Lindisfarne Island. In New Haven in the United States a group of Anglican deaconesses founded St Hilda's House in 1910 serving the church, the church school and the poor and orphaned in the area.



Remains of the abbey at Whitby

Prayer

(Collect)

O Almighty God,
who willest to be glorified in thy Saints,
and didst raise up thy servant Hilda to shine as a light in the world:
Shine, we pray thee, in our hearts,
that we also in our generation may show forth thy praises,
who hast called us out of darkness into thy marvellous light;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

(Sarah Price)

O God of peace, by whose grace the abbess Hilda was endowed with gifts of justice,
prudence, and strength to rule as a wise mother over the nuns and monks of her
household, and to become a trusted and reconciling friend to leaders of the Church:
Give us the grace to recognize and accept the varied gifts you bestow on men and
women,
that our common life may be enriched and your gracious will be done;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and for ever. Amen.

(Malcolm Guite)

Called to a conflict and a clash of cultures,
Where insults flew whilst synod was in session,
You had the gift to find the gift in others,
A woman's wisdom, deftness and discretion.

You made a space and place for poetry
When outcast Caedmon, crouching in the byre,
Was called by grace into community
And local language joined the Latin choir.

Abbess we need your help, we need your wisdom,
Your strong recourse to reconciliation,
Your power tempered by God's hidden kingdom,
Your exercise of true imagination.

Pray for our synods now, princess of peace,
that every fettered gift may find release.

Every star shall sing a carol

There are a number of things we want to punish the Covid-19 virus for – the sufferings of the sick, the deaths, the increased poverty as people lose work, the lockdowns, the general anxiety. But I also want to ‘get’ it for stopping us singing – or at least having to muffle our voices behind masks and scarves.

This is the week during which we tended to start the serious singing of carols. It is not really going to be like that this Christmas. We can only look back longingly to the “Nine lessons and carols” services held in packed churches on Christmas Eve or thereabouts.

Incidentally, that glorious service was first held in 1880 when a Bishop Benson in Cornwall, concerned at the excessive consumption of alcohol in Cornish pubs during the festive season, sought a means of attracting revellers out of the pubs and into church by offering a religious celebration of Christmas. In it the story is told of the fall of humanity, the promise of the Messiah, and the birth of Jesus – all in nine short Bible readings from Genesis, the prophetic books and the Gospels, interspersed with the singing of Christmas carols.

Carols do somehow represent a blend of the everyday (drunken people in pubs), some sadness (this is a tough and sinful world) celebration and joyous spiritual expectation. They put these seemingly contradictory things together. They tend to be very earthy – in the sense of down to earth – because Christmas celebrates God being brought, quite literally, down to earth, into our reality.

This is so beautifully expressed in Christina Rossetti’s, to my mind, perfect carol, “In the bleak mid-winter”:

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

There it is, the harsh everyday reality.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

There is the impossible contradiction.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

More contradiction, and angels, which we expect in carols. But what a glorious paradox.

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if
I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; yet
what I can I give him: give my heart.

It says it all so beautifully. Yes it is a bleak world. God reduces, empties himself, to the constraints of a poor stable. God is loved by a mother – he experiences the kiss of a mother, something every child does. And we know what it means for a human mother to love a child. There is not much frail humans can give back for the gift of Jesus Emmanuel – but, yes we can, with our hearts, our devotion.

Christmas carols are traditionally sung during Advent and Christmas itself or during the surrounding Christmas period. The word carol itself comes from a French term meaning a circular dance.

Some Christmas hymns are very ancient though these tend to be very heavily theological and austere. Like this very early one from Prudentius about 400 AD that starts:

Of the Father's heart begotten,
Before the world from chaos rose,
He is Alpha, from that Fountain
All that is and has been flows;
He is Omega, of all things,
Yet to come the mystic Close,
Evermore and evermore.

In the Medieval period monks began singing sequences of poetry and in the 12th century some carols started using the music from popular songs, which usually had verses and refrains. By the 14th century they had become a popular religious song form. Early carols from the 16th century include “God rest you merry gentlemen” and “While shepherds watched their flocks by night”.

One of the best known carols from this period is the “Coventry Carol”, part of a mystery play put on by one of the guilds (the Drapers’ Guild) in an annual pageant.

The play depicts the Christmas story from chapter two in the Gospel of Matthew: the carol itself refers to the Massacre of the Innocents, in which Herod ordered all male infants under the age of two in Bethlehem to be killed, and takes the form of a lullaby sung by the mothers of the doomed children. Within the pageant, the carol is sung by three women of Bethlehem, who enter on stage with their children immediately after Joseph is warned by an angel to take his family to Egypt. The lyrics are heart-breaking; farewelling the children that Herod has ordered to be killed.

Lully, lullah, thou little tiny child,
Bye bye, lully, lullay.
Thou little tiny child,
Bye bye, lully, lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do
For to preserve this day
This poor youngling for whom we sing,
"Bye bye, lully, lullay"?

Herod the king, in his raging,
Chargèd he hath this day
His men of might in his own sight
All young children to slay.

That woe is me, poor child, for thee
And ever mourn and may
For thy parting neither say nor sing,
"Bye bye, lully, lullay."

Here again we see the earthly realism of carols. This is a world of sin and death, where innocents are daily done to death, by war, civil unrest, poverty and disease. It is a carol fit for this time of pandemic.

Carols are marvellous precisely because they bring things together: our pain and our joy, our sinfulness and God's grace, our earthly lives and the divine presence, our worries about the future and our hopes of something great and good coming. They are incarnation songs – celebrating that the Alpha and the Omega can become human, can become a child amongst us.

There was a marvellous scene in another of the Medieval mystery plays about the nativity.

Some sheep thieves are being chased and they quickly hide the lamb they have stolen in the crib next to the baby Jesus.

And there you have the comic wonder of it all. They hide a sheep, pretending it is a baby, and God has hidden himself in the same crib in a real baby. We are singing about wonderful, utterly wonderful things.

Every star shall sing a carol.
Every creature, high or low,
Come and praise the King of Heaven
By whatever name you know.

“The party’s over”

That is the headline on yesterday’s daily newspaper (the *Witness* from Pietermaritzburg) on the State President’s Monday night address. They sum up the situation so well:

- It’s back to Level 3 restrictions as South Africa ignores Covid guidelines
- Wear a mask or go to jail
- Gatherings restricted, booze sales banned, beaches and resorts off-limits
- Vaccine only here after April 2021

Yes. It is tough and we will have to be tough and disciplined to survive the next few months. All praise to the truthfulness of the State President’s message.

As Christians we have to be hard headed and commonsensical about the situation. What has come to pass was perhaps inevitable and there was little that most of the countries of the world could do to stop it. It is true that countries such as China, South Korea and Taiwan appear to have succeeded but they had cultures where discipline and adherence to whole community norms were strong and if necessary enforced. The other countries of the world, tied into the culture of “getting and spending”, had laid waste their powers of foresight and concern for the future – nobody was ready for the pandemic (although the scientists and philanthropists such as Bill Gates had been warning of the danger for years). And after the first wave and lockdowns, people used to instant gratification and doing what they want, soon propagated the new waves of infection. Discipline is so inconvenient!

So now we are in the midst of plague. Virtually everybody now knows somebody who has been infected. Our parish church now has sick members. I am reliably informed that it is estimated that a third of the population of KwaZulu-Natal is now infected. We all now have to assume that everybody we meet is a potential carrier. And unfortunately, the hospitals are now full. People are being turned away from both state and private hospitals.

So what is to be done?

Firstly, we have to take real responsibility for our own safety. This requires discipline and a freedom from sentimentality. No you cannot hug your grandchildren. It may kill you. No you cannot take unnecessary risks.

Second, as things get worse and hospitals cannot cope, we have a Christian duty to care for the infected. Making full use of the protection we need (masks, gloves, sanitiser), we have to give support to families and people living alone. We can deliver food to the sick and where necessary visit them and give what help we can. Jesus of Nazareth says to us directly: “I was sick and you took care of me.” (Matthew 25:36). Christian parishes need to keep in touch with all parishioners to see how they are faring.

Lastly, we can hope. We are the people of hope, and that is partly because we don't have to rely on our own earthly survival or rescue. We put our trust in "the Word that was with God and was God and was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him." We came into being through him. That is all we need to know and trust in. We came into being through him. And he is the light that shines in darkness and the darkness will never put it out.

Prayer (Kathryn Reid, World Vision)

Jesus, during your ministry you showed your power and caring by healing people of all ages and stations of life from physical, mental, and spiritual ailments. Be present now to people who need your loving touch because of Covid-19. May they feel your power of healing through the care of doctors and nurses.

Take away the fear, anxiety, and feelings of isolation from people receiving treatment or under quarantine. Give them a sense of purpose in pursuing health and protecting others from exposure to the disease. Protect their families and friends and bring peace to all who love them.

Dear Lord, we lift to you our concern for people who are more likely than others to become severely ill from Covid-19 — the elderly and people with chronic health conditions. Protect them from harm and be their comfort in this time of uncertainty and, for many, preventive isolation from loved ones.

God, as more people get sick, healthcare workers and first responders are working longer hours with fewer supplies and with more risk of contracting the new coronavirus themselves. Renew their energy and sustain them on long shifts. Bring your protection upon them as they work with patients. Multiply their supplies so they have the protective items needed to stay safe on the job.

Father, we seek your wisdom daily. Be with people making decisions that affect the lives and futures of our families, communities, countries, and the wider world. We pray that they communicate clearly, truthfully, and calmly — with each other and with the public — and that their messages are received and heeded. May truth and empathy be the touchstones of people setting policies for our protection.

Amen

The year is over – the baggage remains

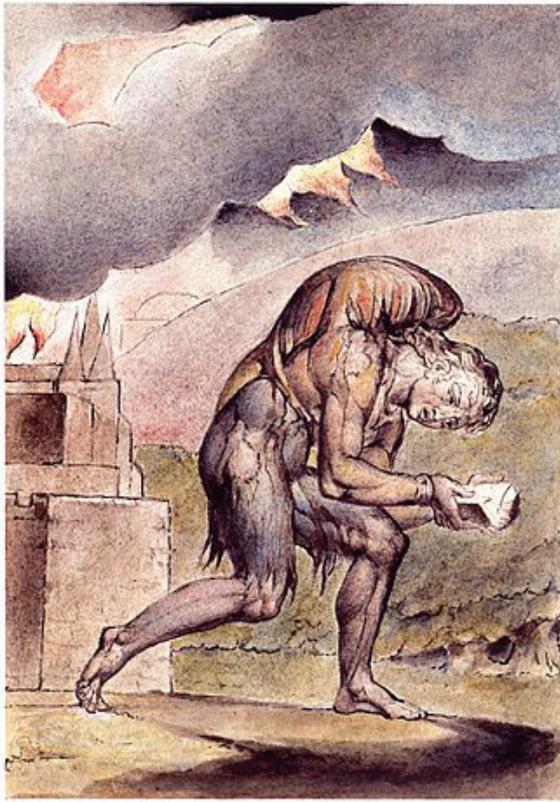
This is normally the time when we cheerfully consign the year gone past to the scrapyard of history and, eternally optimistic, look forward to a better one ahead. I fear no such luck this year end. In our parish we usually had a New Year's Eve service in which we wrote down a list of our failures and disappointments of the year on scraps of paper which were then ceremonially burned outside our west door. Can't do it this year at church – we are under lockdown and curfew. No, we are going to have to carry over a lot of unfinished business. The baggage of 2020 will be with us for a long time.

Let us start with all those good resolutions that we took, either at the beginning of 2020 or during the course of the year.

Some of the resolutions were personal – we will do regular exercises throughout the lockdown (how long did that last?), we will spend less time watching television and looking entrancedly at our smartphone screens (oh yeah), we will be more spiritually disciplined and do some serious Bible study (maybe).

Other resolutions were more social and communal. We recognized the value of the frontline workers, those less well paid nurses, grocery store workers, delivery drivers, electricians, and others. They were essential to our lives and deserved a better deal and we were going to do something about it (When? How?). We were bereft of church services and even when we were allowed back, found them sparsely populated. That shocked us into recognising that the church building and its services were not the Church, we were, and in this now alien world we had to learn anew how to be the Church. We watched the Zondo Commission hearings and wondered whether, like the Truth and Reconciliation hearings 24 years ago, not much would happen subsequently by way of reparations and prosecutions of those who had not confessed. The looting of monies for Covid-related supplies re-enforced our awareness that corruption was still deeply embedded in the civil-service and the private sector. Were we going to continue the fight against corruption? And then, those of us with interest in politics beyond our borders, watched with horrified fascination how the most powerful democracy on earth was brought to its knees by an ignorant, greedy, merciless demagogue whose irresponsibility and pathological lying has led to several hundred thousand unnecessary Covid-19 deaths. All this was potentially a wake-up call to individuals and the Church (which in post-apartheid South Africa had gone into a kind of prophetic hibernation). There is work to be done. The struggle is never over.

So we will come to 2021 with still to-be-fulfilled resolutions. Some of them will have to be dragged after us, holding us back. Some of them may help stiffen our resolve and determination to move forward into the year ahead – one which will probably be as difficult as 2020 because most informed estimates are that it will be only in 2022 that full vaccination will eliminate the threat of the virus. The ongoing unemployment and the schooling system's failure to deliver the knowledge and skills required in the modern world remain huge challenges for us – not just the state but the Church too.



Faced with all this burdensome baggage we may feel like John Bunyan's pilgrim as he progresses on his journey weighed down by the sack of sins and failures on his back. Or even worse, for Bunyan's pilgrim was at least carrying only his own sins, we seem to be carrying our own faults as well as the debris from our failed societies and institutions.

But if one may learn from *Pilgrim's Progress*, there are several positives. Even if our burden is heavy, if we have set out on the road that is good, we know where we are going.

We have guidance – if we read the good book(s) – as the pilgrim did. People have travelled this post-disaster path before us. There is encouragement.

Lastly, John Bunyan's pilgrim finally laid down his burden. Here is the passage:

Now I saw in my dream, that the highway up which Christian was to go, was fenced on either side with a wall, and that wall was called Salvation. [Isaiah 26:1] Up this way, therefore, did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back.

He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.

God incarnate faced the worst disaster of all, death. God incarnate was in a sepulchre. He offers to all of us the gift of leaving our burdens, our travails in his tomb, with him in his death. They are done. In our salvation we do not have to worry anymore whether we win or lose. All that is negative we leave in that sepulchre and we need see it no more. We are now on another road, and somebody will be walking along it with us. We are heading to Emmaus.

Prayer (Frank Schaefer)

Meet us, Lord, on the road to Emmaus,
Guide us on the path toward our destination,
and renew our strength as we continue to walk and commune with you.
Open our eyes, so we see the signs of your presence around us;
open our hearts, so we may receive your peace and love;
and empower us to pass on to others
the grace you have shared with us so freely.

The past and new year

I confess to not having been a devotee of New Year celebrations. I was brought up by grandparents who would have a drink just before midnight, sing Auld Lang Syne and go to bed. I have never been persuaded that more than that was necessary. And for those who do not know it, here are the words of Robert Burns' song ('translated' from the Scots):

Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and auld lang syne?

For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.

And surely you'll buy your pint cup!
and surely I'll buy mine!
And we'll take a cup o' kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.

We two have run about the hills,
and picked the daisies fine;
But we've wandered many a weary foot,
since auld lang syne.

We two have paddled in the stream,
from morning sun till dine;
But seas between us broad have roared
since auld lang syne.

And there's a hand my trusty friend!
And give me a hand o' thine!
And we'll take a right good-will draught,
for auld lang syne.

Is it right that old times be forgotten? The song begins by posing that rhetorical question. The answer is generally interpreted as a call to remember long-standing friendships. So the song, as its title suggests, encourages us, "for the sake of old times", to celebrate, sometimes with sadness, sometimes with joy, our friends and companions of the past, separated as we may be from them by seas that "between us broad have roared", disasters and death.

This evening I watched a part of Trevor Noah's Daily Show in which a guest light-heartedly suggested that 2020 had been so horrible that we should expunge it from memory and history. For future generations it should simply be a blank year. Interesting as the thought was, it is wrong.

For Burns was right. Old acquaintance should not be forgotten and old times, even annus horribilis 2020, should be remembered. It is true that this past year will be thought of for decades, if not centuries to come, as the year of the great global pandemic, of dismay, social isolation, incompetent leadership from ruling elites, corruption and human misery. But it was also an annus mirabilis, a "wonderful year" in which humanity exhibited its courage, its willingness to lay down life for the infected and dying, its willingness to give support to the hungry and unemployed, its celebration of the good. It was a year too in which many of us re-recognised our love and dependence on our friends and colleagues and on other people in general. We were literally all in this together. So we can, as this year ends, give thanks for "auld acquaintance".

And as the New Year dawns, the song has a simple single resolution for us: "take a cup of kindness" – if we are kinder, much will be well in 2021.

Prayer (Book of Common Prayer)

Almighty and eternal God,
so draw our hearts to you,
so guide our minds,
so fill our imaginations,
so control our wills,
that we may be wholly yours,
utterly dedicated to you;
and then use us, we pray to you, as you will,
and always to thy glory and the welfare of your people;
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

(Scottish Celtic prayer)

God, bless to me the new day,
Never given to me before;
It is to bless your own presence you have given me this time, O God.
Bless my eye, may my eye bless all it sees
I will bless my neighbour, may my neighbour bless me.

On not waiting for the work to begin

Several people I was in communication with on New Year's Day were already bored. The day itself had been an anti-climax. Nothing much happened. They couldn't do much. Some stayed in bed for much of the day. Is this what it has come to – looking forward to endless lockdown and privation? But “looking forward” sounds wrong. It is precisely that there is not much to ‘look forward’ to that debilitates us.

Part of the problem is that social distancing tends to unbind us from that which connects people to each other and from the world in which we work to make it a fit home for human beings to live and flourish in. Those of us in gainful employment may begin to get a sense of what life is like for the unemployed who have nothing to look forward to – endless days with no hope of any job, however menial, and little chance to realise one's potential as a human being, to turn labour into sustenance and well-being. In South Africa this waiting for nothing was already endemic and gets worse every year as many under-prepared school leavers, clutching their third rate Senior Certificates, join the queue to nowhere.

This is not how it is meant to be.

Jesus came that we might have abundant life (John10:10):

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Yes, we know it was never going to be a walk in the park. How could it be when we are asked to take up the cross and follow Jesus? But followers of the early Way were full of passionate life. They stared out at a world that had been transformed for them – for it was a world that God loved, a world for which God had determined that everybody would be saved. Those early disciples lived in joy (I Timothy 4:10):

“For we labour and struggle to this end, because we have hoped in a living God who is the saviour of all human beings, especially those who have faith.”

For some reason much of the Church in this world seems to have given up on doing things for the betterment and humanisation of this world. We have sat back and assumed that caring for human beings and the earth was somehow now the job of the state or a trickle down from private wealth. No doubt it is a task for good government but not alone. No doubt it is useful to have rich philanthropists giving back some of their profiteering. But it is our task above all to make and heal this human world.

We cannot keep on waiting for work or for the work to begin. There is only now, an eternal now. It is now that we have to align ourselves with the living one. We have to live life abundantly *now*. And work. And there will be much to be done in this period of a massive surge in the pandemic. And we have to find and create real work for all.

There is no excuse, no way of fobbing off Jesus of Nazareth, even if we have to be dragged kicking and screaming into the new world of abundant life.

John 12:32

“Now is the judgment on this cosmos; now shall the Archon ruler of this cosmos be cast out; And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will drag everyone to me.”

Prayer (Book of Common Prayer)

Heavenly Father,
we remember before you those who suffer want and anxiety from lack of work.
Guide the people of this land so to use our public and private wealth
that all may find suitable and fulfilling employment,
and receive just payment for their labour; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Christian socialist)

O God, who made us in your image and intended us for creative work;
look with love on those of us who are unemployed.
Help us to enjoy life together with those who have work
and to understand what kind of help we need to give one another,
whether in paid employment or not.
Guide the leaders of our country,
that they may take wise decisions which will benefit us all.
Finally we ask you Lord to guide us
in the knowledge that we all have worth in ourselves
and that we are all of equal value in your eyes,
through Jesus Christ Our Lord.
Amen.

On the virtue of patience

The idea that patience is a Christian virtue was first formulated way back in AD 410 in an epic Latin poem, the *Psychomachia* (Battle of Souls), by Prudentius (who also wrote one of our first Christmas carols) and he highlighted patience as striving against anger. Patience, alongside the other virtues is that steady character trait, as distinct from a single action or feeling, that makes its possessor a good human being.

In our current predicament patience is that fundamental virtue, or rather that complex mix of virtues, that we need to survive as good persons. We need it to do battle with our all too human instincts to be impatient, uncaring, idle and cowardly. Patience is that ability to wait for something without frustration, to suffer discomfort without complaint, to endure. Of course patience also demands other virtues such as self-control, humility, generosity and the ability to put ourselves into other people's shoes (for it is so easy to become impatient with other people).

It should not surprise us that the letter writers of the New Testament, James, Paul, and the authors of Hebrews, all offered encouragement to the new Christians to be patient. They speak as clearly to us today and we should listen:

Hebrews 12:1-2

“Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

James 1:2-4

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”

1 Thessalonians 5:14

“And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the disorderly, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, and be patient with everyone.”

Galatians 5:22

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness.”

Colossians 3:12

“Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.”

Ephesians 4:2-3

“With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

As the pandemic worsens, and we are more and more aware of people we know succumbing to the infection, so will the difficulties increase for all of us. We will have to decide how to answer the various calls upon us, be both prudent and compassionate.

I Peter 1:13

“Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.”

Prayer (Lord-prayer-words.com)

Dear Father
I am not alone,
You are by my side.
Hold me, guide me,
As I seek to serve you.
You have called me to rescue,
To protect and to make peace.
I am not alone,
You are by my side.
Amen.

How long?

I think a lot of people felt a great sense of letdown at the end of the year – they had imagined that the pandemic and lockdowns would all be over by then. It was not and we are back in a more severe lockdown level, even if not quite approaching that first traumatic one. So the call goes out – “How long?”

It is not an unusual question. The people of the scriptures often asked that question of God – the psalms in particular are replete with anguished and sometimes angry appeals of “How long, O Lord?”, usually in relation to Israel’s suffering at the hands of enemies, the scoffing of invaders, and sinful sorrow at God’s punishment of Israel.

Psalm 6:3

“My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?”

Psalm 13:1

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?”

Psalm 35:17

“How long, Lord, will you look on?”

Psalm 90:13

“Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants! How long must your servant endure?”

Psalm 74:9

“We are given no signs from God; there is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long.”

And on and on, and sometimes echoed by prophets such as Habakkuk (1:2)

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save?

Even Jesus uttered the words “How long?” in both anguish and irritation at the failures of people, including his disciples, to have faith, as when the disciples had failed to heal a possessed dumb boy (Mark 9:17-19):

And one in the crowd said ... “I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

“You faithless generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

So I guess it is OK to say, "How long?"

This is who we are, creatures of time and space, living our lives now under threat of disease and death and unable to make much meaning out of the sufferings of this time. We are anxious, scared, worried and we fear for those we love. We want this horrible time to be over. So we can cry out "How long?" in our anguish, knowing full well that there will not be any immediate obvious answer visible in the material world.

But by crying out "How long?" we address the divine spirit, we acknowledge that Lordship, we place our futures, living or departed, in the creator's hands. We accept, we own, our sense of helplessness, our inability to control our situation. In humility we place our lives under the Lordship of the one who too has suffered, and lost all control over the earthly situation, nailed to a cross, subject to pain, death and isolation. To that divine victor we sing "How long?"

Prayer (Romans 8:31-37)

What then shall we say about these things?

If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not withhold his own Son, but rather delivered him over on behalf of all of us, how shall he not grace us with all things along with him?

Who will make a charge against God's chosen ones?

God is the one who vindicates: Who is the one who condemns?

The Anointed One, Jesus, is the one who died – and more than that, he was raised.

Who is at God's right hand?

Who also intercedes for us?

Who will separate us from the love of the Anointed?

Affliction or anguish or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or the sword?

As has been written: "For your sake we are being put to death all day long, we were reckoned as sheep for slaughter."

Rather, in all these things we are winning a most glorious victory through the one who has loved us.

A person in whom there is no deceit

The lectionary reading for today is John 1:43-51 and is about the rather extraordinary recruitment of Nathanael to be a disciple. I say extraordinary because it is a rather odd account and like John's gospel as a whole, is replete with multiple layers of meaning.

It starts as a simple message about how the gospel is advanced – disciples recruit other disciples. As soon as Philip had been called by Jesus he immediately goes off to tell his friend Nathanael about it.

“Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’”

Yes, Nathanael is a friend but he is also a friend who has a shared religious understanding. Nathanael knows about the Law and the Prophets and has an expectation of a coming Messiah. A few years later the first Christians will also try first to disciple their co-religionists in the synagogues of the ancient world before then moving on to the gentiles.

But sometimes that religious background, moulded as it was by contemporary social and economic mores, can be a handicap.

“Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’”

Sometimes the way we look at the nativity stories may give us a wrong impression, that somehow Jesus was already a very important person. In reality Jesus comes from an obscure little village with about 400 inhabitants and a bad reputation. The irony is that the preceding verses of the gospel of John have told us that Jesus come from God and is the ultimate revelation of the Father. Yet here Jesus is, coming from Nazareth.

John 1:10-11

“He was in the world,
and the world came into being through him;
yet the world did not know him.
He came to what was his own,
and his own people did not accept him.”

But Nathanael accepts that simple call to come and see, even if he is sceptical that the Messiah can come from such a place as Nazareth. Actually seeing is always the best way to deal with prejudice, even a rational prejudice.

Nathanael is utterly thrown when Jesus greets him with the words:

“Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

Nathanael is perplexed as to how Jesus came to know him. I think we have to understand here that Nathanael was affirmed by what Jesus said – Jesus had seen into the character of this good and honest man.

Jesus says that:

“I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

Some kind of clairvoyance? Or perhaps a Jewish idiom signifying that Jesus knew of him as a devout student of the Torah, the Law. But Nathanael’s reaction, acclaiming Jesus as indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, indicates that he realised that Jesus had seen into the depths of his heart, soul and mind.

There is a lot that we can learn from this account – how disciples are called, the usefulness of having a religious background in common, and yet the dangers of prejudging people who come from a different background (whether it be religious, social, economic, educational or ethnic).

But we can also learn that Jesus wanted honest people to join his team, people in whom there is no deceit. And so in this current world of deceit and misinformation we perhaps need to value those people more too, even if they can be a bit prickly at first.

Prayer

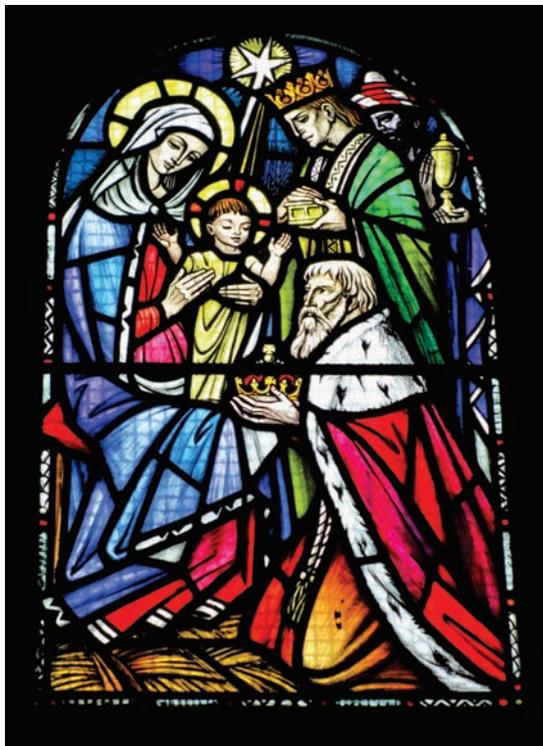
O Lord, who calls to humanity to come and follow you,
We give thanks that you see into our innermost being
And still call us, rescuing us from our backgrounds, prejudices and sins;
Give us grace to follow in your steps,
Transform our hearts and minds,
Enable us also to see others as you see them,
As people who will rejoice that you are Messiah,
Saviour of the World, Light of the God of Truth.

Epiphany

Four days before Christmas this year we had our own very real Christmas “star” in the sky when the planets Jupiter and Saturn had their greatest “great conjunction” in 397 years. Many scholars conjecture that the original Christmas star that attracted the magi was such a conjunction of planets or of a planet and a star, of which there were several in the years 6 and 2 BC.

Matthew’s gospel states (2:1-2) that:

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’”



These Magi were, it is assumed, Persian Zoroastrian priestly astronomer/astrologers and the “star” they saw was probably a planetary conjunction involving the ‘king maker’ of the planets, Jupiter. Before telescopes were invented, planets, stars, and comets were all called “stars,” and these magi would have been watching the stars and noting their relation to points on the horizon and to the constellations in which they appeared. The Magi saw celestial events that led them to conclude that a new world ruler had been born in Israel. Therefore, they made a logical decision and went to Jerusalem, the religious and political capital of Israel, and asked the king where to find this new ruler. There they got an audience with King Herod, who directed them to go to Bethlehem, the purported birth site for Davidic kings.

A lot of what we think we know about the magi and their journey does not come from Matthew but from legendary concoctions served up to us in Christmas carols. Nowhere does it say that they followed a star from their homeland to Bethlehem, that they were kings or how many there were. There were probably far more than three (think of a large diplomatic delegation with their bodyguards and all – Matthew 2:3 says that “Herod was frightened and all Jerusalem with him”).

What is important is what Christians have made of the magi and their visit. After all, today is the feast of the Epiphany, the showing forth, the first manifestation, of the divine to the gentiles. Given that the birth of Jesus was the most important event in world history according to the Christians, the gentile Christians took some pleasure in the story that Jesus had been revealed to them first – and a lot of paintings in the Roman catacombs bear witness to this. They also scoured the scriptures to find prophecies of this visit (Isaiah 49:7; Isaiah 60:3, 6; Psalm 72:10-11).

The visit of the magi anchors Jesus in the real world of history, of international politics, and the reign of the brutal puppet king, Herod the Great. The visit of these priest-scientists of their day reminds us that all knowledge, religious and scientific, is a step towards, and homage before, the God of truth. Indeed for the early Christians it meant that superstition was totally overthrown (a position that remained strong until the late Middle Ages). That the magi were not Jews shows that the mission to the gentiles is part of the heart of the Christian story and that there is a new beginning for all people. Lastly, we should remember today, with people still following horoscopes and fake news that stars are not in charge of the universe and our lives – the Lord is.

Prayer (Eastern Orthodox Troparion of the Nativity)

Your birth, O Christ our God,
dawned the light of knowledge upon the earth.
For by your birth those who adored stars
were taught by a star
to worship you, the Sun of Justice,
and to know you, Orient from on High.
O Lord, glory to You.

Resurgence

A lot of things have been coming back. Unfortunately.

Foremost on our minds is the resurgence of the Covid-19 virus, with new variants too. All over the world we are seeing so-called second waves of the pandemic washing the sick and dying into already packed hospitals and forcing new lockdowns. Even China, which had the authoritarian power to discipline behaviour after relaxing lockdowns, is facing new surges. It is all the worse now because most of us know people who have died or are very ill. It is now longer a distant threat.

In the wider world, the fascism that our parents or grandparents went to war against, has remerged. It is seen in the crypto-fascist wave of Donald Trump in the United States and other authoritarian leaders in the world who have taken advantage of the conservatism of the old, the ignorance of the undereducated, and the ease of manipulating them through the social media (themselves driven by profit-mad technology and advertising firms). A world of inequality and untruth is no longer far away.

But there is another kind of resurgence – the resurgence of the good, of life. There have been occasions when humanity seems on its last legs, but then there is resurgence. The Christian faith has had its ups and downs, there have been many historical occasions in which Christianity seems to have died, but it comes back again and again – for it has a God who seems to know the way out of the grave.

Think of that previous pandemic, the black death plague which killed half the population of Europe and probably as many elsewhere – humanity came back.

Think of the persecution of the early church, the leadership exterminated. The Church survived, came back, cared for the sick in the Mediterranean world's own pandemic, and triumphed.

Think of the terrible first half of the 20th century in which more people were killed than in all previous centuries and in which an estimated 35 million Christians were martyred under fascism and Soviet communism. Yet the faith survived and outlasted these regimes.

Think of the times when the Church has gone through periods of decline and staleness. Yet Christianity has that inner capacity of renewal, of revival, of resurgence. Our critics often tell us that the rituals and institutions of religion are hollow shells and that they are doomed. They are of course correct. It is not the surface manifestations, the clothing, of the Body of Christ that matter. It is the life within them that triumphs over time and death. And leads revival after revival, reformation after reformation, and gives new life again.

If we trust “what has come into being in him” (John 1:3-5) and that is life and light, we know that this “light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out.”

Are we willing to be part of this resurgence, this wave of life and light that can overcome all disasters? Can we see the indicators of this resurgence as the pandemic peels away some of our protective shells and inhibitions and opens our eyes to the reality around us? Can we face up to the challenge to align ourselves with this far greater wave – this resurgence of the Body of Christ?

Prayer

Lord, victor over death, rescuer of the imprisoned,
redeemer of the enslaved, liberator from the failures of the past:
Enable us to see the everlasting strength of your resurgent life,
that we may joyfully and bravely join with you,
as you bring life and light to humanity,
overcoming all darkness;
In the powerful name of Christ Victor,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
One God, beyond all ages.
Amen.

Re-capturing the city

I was up till 2 am on Thursday morning watching with horrified fascination the television coverage of the attempted insurrection by an inflamed mob of President Trump's supporters who had stormed the Capitol building in Washington, District of Columbia, United States of America. Their aim, as instructed by President Trump, was to prevent the legal certification as Present-Elect of the person who had soundly beaten him in the recent election. For citizens of that country, this day of infamy may well be remembered as long as the horror of the pandemic, the latter horror made far worse by the denialism and lies of Trump.

The insurrectionists, most of whom actually believe the lies told by Trump (a pathological liar whom fact-checkers have shown to have uttered more than 24 000 ascertainable untruths in the last four years), actually gained control of their objective for a few hours before police reinforcements forced them out, and the democratic business of government could resume.

I could not stop thinking of an obscure book by John Bunyan called the ***"The losing and taking again of the Town of Man-soul or the Holy War made by Shaddai upon Diabolus, for the Regaining the Metropolis of the World"***. Now some people may have heard and even read John Bunyan's famous book ***"A Pilgrims's Progress"***. This book is not well known or publicised, perhaps because John Bunyan was also interested in God's determination to see social and economic justice. [As an aside, the well known red flag of the socialists was borrowed by them from this book which states: "Then Prince Emmanuel commanded, and they set the red flag upon that mount called Mount Justice."]

The book is an allegory of how every person's soul (the Man-soul of the title) is like a city that has been captured by an evil insurrection and that Christ, the golden prince Emmanuel of the allegory, has to come and reclaim it. It is a hard task, indeed a bloody and protracted war, for evil (Diabolus) "has taken Mansoul by fraud, and keeps it by violence and deceit." The people of the city of man-soul are "besotted" – they have been fed on lies and misinformation – and all commanded not to pay any attention to the truth. There is a full cast of the misinformation machine – Mr. Incredulity, Mr. Haughty, Mr. Swearing, Mr. Whoring, Mr. Hard-Heart, Mr. Pitiless, Mr. Fury, Mr. No-Truth, Mr. Stand-to-Lies, Mr. False-Peace, Mr. Drunkenness, Mr. Cheating, Mr. Atheism. There is a wonderful scene of the devils plotting their media strategy:

The people of Mansoul now are, every one, simple and innocent, all honest and true; nor do they as yet know what it is to be assaulted with fraud, guile, and hypocrisy. They are strangers to lying and dissembling lips; wherefore we cannot, if thus we be disguised, by them at all be discerned; our lies shall go for true sayings, and our dissimulations for upright dealings. What we promise them they will in that believe us, especially if, in all our lies and feigned words, we pretend great love to them, and that our design is only their advantage and honour.

Much of our contemporary church talk about what Jesus did for us on the cross is about a rather morally odd transaction in which Jesus takes the punishment for our sins because God's justice demands someone be punished. Whilst undoubtedly Jesus does represent Israel and all humanity on the cross, the actual testimony of the New Testament is rather about a titanic battle on the cross in which Christ the victor, ambushes evil and death and liberates the captives. And it is this battle that Bunyan captured so perfectly (and sometimes a bit luridly, as does the Revelation of John).

Prince Emmanuel states his task of liberating the city of Man-soul:

"O Mansoul, it is not my commission nor inclination at all to do you hurt. Why do you fly so fast from your friend, and stick so close to your enemy? Indeed, I would have you, because it becomes you to be sorry for your sin, but do not despair of life; this great force is not to hurt you, but to deliver you from your bondage, ...

My commission, indeed, is to make a war upon Diabolus your king, and upon all Diabolonians with him; for he is the strong man armed that keeps the house, and I will have him out: his spoils I must divide, his armour I must take from him, his fortress I must cast him out of, and must make it a habitation for myself.

...

I could, would I now put forth my might, cause that forthwith he should leave you and depart; but I have it in my heart so to deal with him, as that the justice of the war that I shall make upon him may be seen and acknowledged by all. He has taken Mansoul by fraud, and keeps it by violence and deceit, and I will make him bare and naked in the eyes of all observers.

All my words are true. I am mighty to save, and will deliver my Mansoul out of his hand.

As we battle natural and human evil, within our own minds and within our own societies, this is indeed the liberator we want to have battling for us, even when we at times foolishly resist him.

Prayer

Lord Emmanuel, redeemer of our souls and world,
We give thanks that you are our liberator from evil and harm,
Forgive us for giving in to falsehood, lies and selfishness,
Protect us from the corruptions of mind and world,
Give us the energy and the endurance to always stand for the truth.

Lies and gossip

The tumultuous events in the United States of America have led to new soul-searching as to the origins of the lie culture that appears to have infected a substantial portion of the population there. Naturally many critics have simply blamed the social media – Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp – for the ease with which they have allowed outright lies to be propagated at lightning speed. But it is too easy to put all the blame there. One has to look more deeply into factors that have led to this viral epidemic of the communication of falsehood.

Telling lies has long been a deeply ingrained human characteristic. Naturally the scriptures are against lying, how could it not be for the worshippers of the God of Truth (John 4:24 “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”, Titus 1:2 “God, who never lies”)? But they also display great realism – Numbers 23:19 says “God is not a human being, that he should lie” – and there you have it, lying is all too human. Lying is indeed prohibited (take Leviticus 19:11 “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.”) and there are a number of warnings against liars (Psalm 101:7 “No one who practises deceit shall remain in my house; no one who utters lies shall continue in my presence.”). But there is not a great deal in the Bible about lying, though many of the prophets declare God’s hatred of lying and in particular of lying prophets (for example Jeremiah 23:26 and Ezekiel 13:8). Jesus and the writer of 1 John is rather clear on the matter, seeing lying as founded on evil (John 8:44, and 1 John 2:21):

“You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

“I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth.”

What was alarming about the United States experience was that eight out of ten conservative white evangelical ‘Christians’ supported a pathological liar and fascist and their cult-like “prophets” lied as compulsively. Clearly something has gone terribly wrong in society when truth is not taken seriously at all. And why have we and the Church not taken it seriously, and in the spirit of telling truth to power, corrected friends, neighbours and governments when they have lied?

One of the reasons things have got out of control is that we are no longer all local beings, embedded in small communities where we know everybody. Though Paul listed gossiping among such sins as covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, and craftiness (Romans 1:29), it can be argued that gossip is a kind of informal communication service that people render to each other and is in fact an essential

feature of all human communities. People listen to and rely on gossip for news about what is really going on in their community, workplace or church congregation. People often much prefer and will more readily believe a good plausible story in preference to having to listen to an explanation of a complex or ambiguous fact. But as we know gossip could get toxic and deadly in olden times, let alone the present. In gentler times, when people were in close-knit communities, gossip often came up against natural limits. People you gossiped about knew you and could come back to you. Others could straighten things out when stories were misleading. No such boundaries or inhibitions remain at all in the modern social media environment. Gossip and lies are circulated in ever-widening circles at a touch of a button. Some social media apps make forwarded material anonymous – the original source is not listed so any accountability for circulating lies and gossip disappears.

I find I am having to regularly check the factuality of such messages that are forwarded to me for comment. In the majority of cases the information is misleading “fake” news, often well designed with an ideological or product advertising message tagged on to an otherwise innocuous or factual message. Yet few people are willing to take the few minutes needed to check the veracity of such posts.

We have our work cut out for us to re-establish a regime of truth in our lives and society against great social and technological odds.

Prayer

Lord God of Truth, whose holy word stands beyond eternity
whose Son was full of grace and truth,
and brings to us that grace and truth:
Forgive us our lies and our failures to stand up for the truth,
and pardon our weakness in not supporting the truth tellers;
Strengthen our hearts and minds that we may tell the truth,
live lives that embody the truth, be the truth;
Purify our thoughts and intentions that all our words, spoken and written
may be of your Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth,
who reigns with you Father Creator and your Son,
for ever and ever.

Amen.

Awakening

Today is the liturgical celebration of the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth – a difficult ecclesiastical act for churches locked down under the Corona virus deluge.

Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, whom Christians, with their retrospective, insider knowledge, know to be the Word of God, the very self-expression of God, suddenly appears by the Jordan river where there is a wild prophetic man preaching in some kind of revival mission – calling for a return to righteousness and justice, a reformation in the life of the Jews in Palestine. John the Baptist is trying to wake up the people of his time – to repent and live new lives.

There had been a form of baptism before John the Baptist – it was a rite that pagan converts to Judaism underwent. Jews, almost by definition as members of the chosen people, were assured of salvation. So baptism was for pagan sinners and not necessary for Jews. But then John the Baptist comes saying that **all** need to repent, that all are tainted by sin. John's ministry is in a true sense, a revival campaign in which he preaches that God will accept those Jews who recognise that they are indeed sinners and need renewal. They should be baptised in the same way heathen converts were.

Up until now, the region knows nothing about this apparently ordinary working man (except perhaps his immediate family who remember some strange events associated with the time of his birth). He is an unknown. The silent Word of God – sleeping, hidden – waiting to be spoken, awoken into action.

Jesus the carpenter responds to that call and in the waters of John's baptism he awakes to his divine nature and mission.

In the days of the early church it is clear that one of the prayers said at the baptism of new Christian converts was the following (Ephesians 5:14):

“Awake, sleeper,
And arise from the dead,
And Christ will shine on you.”

Most of us were probably baptised a long time ago, and when we were baptised, our mothers probably didn't want us to wake up at all (until after the service)! We may have woken up a little at our confirmation (if we have been confirmed) and so we may understand the symbolism of baptism – drowning our old sinful selves and being pulled out, dragged up, resurrected into the new glorious life and light of Christ.

But our baptism happened a long time ago and it may actually mean relatively little in our daily lives. Ditto our long-ago confirmation.

But God wants us awake.

We need to be awoken regularly, wherever and whenever the spirit of God reaches us and moves us and as we know that Spirit like the wind “blows where he wills” “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

And we know that the sleeper is awake if he or she sees reality as it is and, because that sight is clear in the light of Christ, is now able to truly serve the world in his name, even though it may be in a time of disaster and chaos.

Genuinely living our baptism doesn't require high intelligence, complicated theological learning, or memorising long lists of commandments. It requires us to walk into the water alongside Jesus, to share in his baptism and awaken, follow him.

When we are baptised, we are changed. We are transferred from the authority of darkness to the kingdom of God's beloved son. We take off our dirty garments – physical and spiritual, stained by sin – and clothe ourselves with clean ones, with the righteousness of Christ.

When we enter the water with Jesus we join in his struggle against chaos and destruction and death. Jesus changes the water. When we are baptised the water symbolically purifies us, but when Christ is baptised he purifies the water and reclaims it for the God of creation. In the scriptures large bodies of water were seen as the repositories of evil – the chaos at creation where “darkness covered the face of the deep”, the flood of Noah, the Red Sea that stood between the people of Israel and freedom. It was the place of monsters of the deep. In the Revelation of John at the end of the New Testament, this sea of chaos comes between John and the vision of God (Revelation 4:6) but at the end, it is gone (Revelation 21:1).

We, the baptised community, go with Jesus to transform chaos into Good.

Prayer

Creator, who revealed your Word on earth,
that lived among us and made holy the river of Jordan,
sending down upon the waters your Holy Spirit,
and crushing the heads of the monsters of chaos and evil;
Awaken us with the light of the risen Christ,
Stir us up to arise and serve you in the world,
Help us to use the power of baptism
To keep us holy and clear-sighted
As we join the struggle against chaos and evil,
In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The holy innocents

Today is the Anglican church's liturgical commemoration of the massacre of the children in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth, an event recorded in Matthews' gospel (Matthew 2:16). This was at the order of the ageing and increasingly deranged King Herod, "a scheming, suspicious, unpredictable, violent, hypocritical, brooding wreck of a man" as one scholar has put it. Herod is an appropriate symbol for all tyrants and demagogues who are willing to smash all whom they see as threats. That the innocent suffer – even children – is not their concern, for their attention is turned inward on their own narcissistic needs.

Innocents have died and suffered throughout history at the hands of ruthless and selfish men. Genocide, femicide, massacres, starvation and a multitude of forms of privation are with us still. In Africa itself, millions have been killed in the Congo and Rwanda in the last half century.

But we need to go beyond the more overt atrocities. What of the hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths recently from the virus in the United States of America as a result of Trump's denialism, or not long ago of Mbeki's AIDs denialism in South Africa?

In South Africa child innocents continue to suffer all the time – their lives shortened, their potential degraded.

In 2016 the *South Africa Demographic and Health Survey* found the following:

- Some 27% of children under five are physically stunted and their brains also suffer the largely irreversible negative consequences to their thinking skills
- Only 23% of children and youth aged 6 to 23 have a minimum acceptable diet
- Some 9% of children have never attended school
- Only 28% of children complete secondary school.

Are not those also atrocities in their own way? Are they not a stunning unmasking of the false priorities in our national life at both collective and individual level?

The ongoing culture of violence and general misogyny against women is another South African pandemic that is as destructive, if not more so in the long run, than the Covid one, because its impact lasts forever.

The holy innocents are with us now, not just in Bethlehem, two thousand and twenty years ago.

It is not for nothing that the last book of the New Testament has as its central theme the suffering of the innocent and this is movingly put in Revelation 6:9-11 with its vision of the innocent victims lying before the heavenly altar and asking how long it will be before justice is done. How long indeed?

It is not for nothing that Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 31-46 says in judgement:

“Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

For the holy innocents are indeed holy, for they are Jesus himself.

Prayer

The lyrics of “Lost unto this world” sung by Emmylou Harris

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDYZm8duZ4Q>

I was once some mother's darlin'
Some daddy's little girl
More precious than the ruby
More cherished than the pearl
My heart was full of mercy
And my forehead full of curl
Now I am nothing and am lost unto this world
I am lost unto this world ...

They herded me like cattle
Cut me down like corn
Took me from my babies
Before they could be born
You can blame it on the famine
You can blame it on the war
You can blame it on the devil
It don't matter anymore
I am lost unto this world ...

I was tortured in the desert
I was raped out on the plain
I was murdered by the highway
And my cries went up in vain
My blood is on the mountain
My blood is on the sand
My blood runs in the river
That now washes through their hands
I am lost unto this world ...

Can I get no witness this unholy tale to tell
Was God the only one there watching
And weeping as I fell?
O you among the living
Will you remember me at all
Will you write my name out
With a single finger scrawl
Across a broken window
In some long forgotten wall
That goes stretching out forever
Where the tears of heaven fall?
I am lost unto this world ...

Listening to the President

After days of viewing the last throes of the American neo-fascist presidency it was a relief to listen to President Ramaphosa who appeared to be sane, truthful, willing to give us the bad news as well as the good, caring of all the citizens of the country, statesmanlike and, what a relief, rather more boring in his delivery than a game show host.

The main message of the speech (and one does hope that one day we may get to the stage where journalists can ask questions after Presidential announcements) was that we are in for the long haul (again). The level 3 amended lockdown will continue beyond the initial middle of the month and I suspect it will continue for some time. It has to, because the virus is now so common, so spread among all communities, that ending the lockdown would lead to catastrophic consequences for those who have so far remained uninfected. But the bad news is that because there are no restrictions on work, or it seems, schools, we all, as individuals and families, have to take full responsibility for disciplining our own behaviour and interactions with others. It is going to remain very tough and lonely.

It was good that the President reiterated the need to stand against the abuse of women and children, and change the mind set of men who do the abusing, a struggle in which he saw the need for church support. Also interesting was the issue of alcohol remaining prohibited for the time being and he cited dramatic evidence from Chris Hani Baragwanath hospital on the cut in trauma admissions because of these restrictions. I cannot resist noting the interesting case of Russia in this connection. Russia was always notorious for its problems with drunkenness and alcoholism. In the 1990s one in every two men of working age would die prematurely because of alcohol abuse. In 2003 strict new laws were put in place: monitoring systems, raising taxes and prices, minimum prices, limited alcohol availability, and a strict prohibition on drinking in public spaces such as parks, beaches and recreation areas. The results were dramatic – consumption dropped nearly 43% between 2003 and 2016 and average life expectancy in the country reached the highest it had ever been, at almost 68 years for men and 78 years for women. What this suggests is that the negative and positive impacts of the lockdowns will need to be seriously examined at both collective and individual levels as we chart our way forward. What do we have to change permanently in our own lives?

So there it is. The struggle against the pandemic continues and the hope of an end with the arrival of effective vaccines should not excite us too much. Their procurement and arrival will likely be slow, in inadequate quantities, and we will have to fight against the backwash of misinformation about vaccines from the sewers of the social media.

For Christians who were active members of congregations of worshippers on a Sunday, the times will be doubly difficult. Affirming the reality of the Church as the Body of Christ, of a Communion of the Saints, requires a mental fortitude when all the reinforcement of meeting one's brothers and sisters on a regular basis is withdrawn.

When I was in a confirmation class in my youth, I was told a homely story of why one needed that gathering. The priest was visiting one of his somewhat lapsed parishioners. They sat talking, looking at the fire in the grate. The parishioner said he didn't really see why he needed to attend Church, he was fine at home. The priest, without a word, pushed one of the white hot coals out of the fireplace. They both watched as, alone, it slowly darkened and lost its light and heat. "I'll be back at Church on Sunday, Father!"

How do we keep that coal alive in our isolation? I don't know. We can try all sorts of things and we will. Be we remember these words.

"I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

Prayer (Catholic health Association)

Loving God, we come to you full of anxiety about what may happen in the coming days and weeks. Shower us with the peace Jesus promised to his disciples, and make us into steady pillars for those around us. In this time of uncertainty and epidemic, wake us up to the reminder that we are not alone.

Even as we are asked to keep our distance from others, help us to find ways to reach out to those who need our support. We pray especially for those whose incomes and livelihoods are threatened. For the children who will miss meals due to school closures. For those already isolated, lonely and scared. Loving God, give them your peace, and through our hands ensure they have what they need.

Sustain, strengthen and protect all caregivers. Bless them as they offer compassionate care and show selfless courage in the face of risk.

Remind us, each time we wash our hands, that in our baptism you call us to let go of our fears and live in joy, peace, and hope.
Amen.

The bigger picture

One of the virtues of having readings listed in a lectionary is that one is presented day by day with thematic passages from the scriptures. They offer us summaries of the essential good news messages first written down by our forerunners in the faith.

Today one of the readings is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians 2:1-10 and reading it, and meditating on it, gives us a view of "the bigger picture" that we so need, bogged down as we are in the dreadful trenches of the global pandemic war and the current deranged political wars – our vision crushed and restricted, unable to see out.

"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Paul's argument is inexorable. We live in a corrupted world, ruled over and led astray by the powerful forces of our era – whether you conceive of them as spiritual beings or simply the forces of rancid nationalism and such, their devastating impact is the same. And in that world, that cosmos, that corruption appeals to our bodily senses and passions. And all of us are under that dismal curse, as Paul says, "children of wrath, like everybody else".

Then comes the good news. The mercy, grace, and love of God, even when we were "dead" in our sins, has made us alive again. And here one has to read the words very carefully for they are easily misread and misunderstood. Paul says that God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him, in him, in the heavenly places. This must not be seen as some sort of promise that after we die we will go to heaven. Paul is saying that in Christ we are **already** in heaven, that is, in the direct presence of God. In Christ we are already saved, blessed, graced, in heaven. Our future is already guaranteed and in the ages to come – and that includes our current time-line – he will show us "the immeasurable riches of his grace". Because we are already in the ascended Christ in heaven that means, by that grace and not our own work, that we can attend in this world to the "good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Prayer

Holy and gracious Lord,
who seated us with your Son in your divine presence,
alive in the new life, cleared of our trespasses and sins:
We offer thanks that your love and grace
have freed us from the spirit of chaos and injustice,
cleansed our desires and senses
and given us of your eternal kindness.
Grant that strengthened by you, we may humbly
do those good works that you prepared us to do.
As your people cry out in this time of need,
reinforce our courage and commitment
to do your will in the world.
Amen.

Sophia and Phronesis

I am finding it difficult to detach myself from what is (still) going on in the United States of America where huge swathes of the population seemed to have abandoned all reason as they parrot lies and conspiracy theories, often claiming at the same time to be evangelical Christians. Lies and conspiracy theories are not, of course, foreign to South Africa, including very real conspiracies as becomes more and more clear with each session of the Zondo Commission. How does one restore the idea of wisdom (the New Testament word for which is Sophia) and practical wisdom or prudence (Phronesis) as essential parts of a virtuous life?

Christians often put a very strong premium on belief (or more correctly, faith or trust) and we sometimes forget that the Christian life should also be characterised by virtue. Take 2 Peter 1:5-8:

“For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It is clear that virtue, of which wisdom and prudential, practical wisdom are essential parts, is a support to faith. And we need knowledge to be genuinely virtuous.

Now Sophia (wisdom) is a combination of the human mind being able to understand what is true or real – being able to discern reality – and being able to build up knowledge in a logical way. Phronesis (practical wisdom, sometimes called prudence) is the ability to decide how to achieve our goals in the world, goals that are good and compatible with living a good life, including the making of sensible political decisions. The pursuit of virtue requires both Sophia and Phronesis.

Though we regularly hear the parables of Jesus read out to us on a Sunday, many of us may have missed how educational they are, in the sense of asking us to flex our minds, think about a situation and make practical decisions based upon that learning. Jesus doesn't tell the questioning lawyer who was the good guy in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Rather he asks him a question: “Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbour to him who fell among the robbers?” We have to think! He warns his listeners that they have to become better in their practical wisdom (Matthew 16:1-4):

‘The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.’”

If we cannot interpret the signs of the times in our own earthly environment, we are certainly not going to be handed signs from heaven. Jesus of Nazareth expected his followers to think, to make sure about what was true and what was not true, and to live decisive lives based upon good sense.

May we have that practical understanding and grasp of what is true and right and real in its living expression in our daily lives.

Prayer (Orthodox prayer - adapted)

Christ my Lord, the Giver of light and wisdom,
who opened the eyes of the blind man
and transformed the fishermen into teachers of the gospel
through the coming of the Holy Spirit;
Shine also in my mind the light of the grace of the Holy Spirit.
Grant me discernment, understanding
and wisdom to read the signs of the times.
Enable me to complete my earthly tasks with wisdom
and to abound in every good work,
for to you I give honour and glory. Amen.

This is that - rebellion, fiery serpents and God's love

Numbers 21:4-9

“From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.’ Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses, and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.”

John 3:14-21

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.”

These two texts are so rich in meaning that it would take a lifetime of study to draw out their full implications. Here we have an account of rebellious Israelites grumbling about the quality of their manna, a curative fiery bronze serpent and then a description of Jesus, a new bronze serpent, sent by the God who so loved the world.

But what does this all mean?

One of our modern difficulties is that we do not read the Bible as regularly and as consistently as previous generations did. I am sure I am as guilty of this as most of you are. The loss is that we do not see the complex interplay between the parts of the Bible and the events that are recorded (and meditated on) in its pages.

It makes it difficult for us to fully understand the significance of the words spoken in Acts 2:16:

“This is that which was spoken by the prophet.”

Peter was trying to explain to the crowd astounded by the events of Pentecost. **This** - these strange events, Peter explains, are **That** – that which was prophesied long ago by Joel the prophet. Now there is a multitude of **this is that** in the Bible. What happens now is only fully comprehended, understood, explained, by something else.

The idea of “This is that” is like a system of complex cross-references in a book. And when we hear readings from Old and New Testaments and with a Psalm and Gospel reading thrown in, we are drawn into the full story through those cross-references.

These two texts, these “this is that”s, are about rebellion and God’s extraordinary love.

Rebellion and insurrection are much in the news at the moment. We ourselves may find it hard to look at ourselves as rebels. We tend, maybe, to see ourselves as weak or inadequate, but not as sinners who deliberately turn away from God.

How do we comprehend what God feels when a creation, something brought into existence by love, this immense universe, driven, made by the “love that moves the sun and other stars”, has sentient beings who deliberately turn away from that love.

In these two passages we have two descriptions of that turning away:

The Israelites, rescued from Egypt, “became impatient on the way” and “spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.’” It is the rebellion of **ingratitude and wanting things easy** and of conforming to the mob.

John’s gospel, commenting on the account of Jesus speaking to Nicodemus, the man who came secretly to see Jesus, makes it clear that there are people who love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. Those who do evil hate the light because they do not want their deeds to be exposed. It is the **rebellion of pride, a perverted self-righteousness** that does not want to be seen to be in the wrong.

Yes, we look at ourselves and have we not all been **ungrateful, conformed to the world** and been **unwilling to lose our self-pride**. We have turned away from the light, we who were God’s “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10).

Now to the fiery serpents and the bronze serpent. It is a strange story about the cure for the consequences of human rebellion.

The Israelites in the desert are being bitten by poisonous snakes (described as being a punishment for their rebellion – sin has a bite like a snake!). But the God who sends snakes to torment the sinners is the very same God who provides a remedy. Moses erects a bronze image of a snake on a pole – the image of what caused their suffering now becomes a symbol of their salvation. [One does of course think in this connection of

the well know symbol for a medical doctor of a snake coiled round a pole – the staff of Asclepius.] Jewish commentators have said that it was not the sight of the brazen serpent that cured; but in looking up to it, they looked up to God as the Lord that healed them.

It is to this **That** that John's Gospel provides a **This**.

At the end of Jesus' talk to Nicodemus, the secret follower, he says (John 3:14):

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

So Jesus indicated that this bronze serpent was a foreshadowing of himself, soon to be literally lifted up on a pole, the wooden cross. The serpent lifted up and cursed in the time of Moses now symbolizes Jesus, who takes away sin from everyone who would look to him in faith. The symbol links death and life. Both serpents and the cross kill, but in the amazing response from God, the bronze serpent and the dead man on the cross give life.

Prayer

Holy One of Israel,
who healed your rebellious people in the desert,
and healed us all by the gift of your Son
who died for us on the cross;
Turn our eyes towards your risen Son
as Moses turned the people to the symbol of their restoration;
That we may be lifted up with your Son into your life and light
and serve you in this present time.
Amen.

The Nicene Creed (Part 1)

At most Sunday Eucharists, we all recite the Creed, the so-called Nicene Creed, that sums up the various affirmations and professions of faith that have been made so far in the service – in the scripture readings, in the hymns and prayers, and in the exposition of the word in a sermon. Saying the Creed then, is the congregation affirming the faith of the Church.

Below is a direct translation from the original Greek:

We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

But what is this Creed and Faith that we are affirming? Given that its first words are “We believe ...” what does “believe” mean? What does this Creed mean and do we believe it?

On this and the several subsequent homilies I am going to explore this statement of belief and what it means for our lives as Christians.

First, a little bit of history:

Nicaea was an important Graeco-Roman city (now Iznik in modern day Turkey) where in AD 325 the first ecumenical council was called, that is, a meeting or synod of all the bishops from all over the known world. They came together to address the problem of

what they saw as a heretical distortion of Christian teaching called Arianism, rather similar in character to what modern Jehovah's Witnesses teach about God and Jesus, though unlike modern Jehovah's Witnesses, they were quite happy to align themselves to the power of the State.

The bishops added a series of clauses to earlier baptismal creeds, which were along the lines of our shorter Apostles' Creed, to make quite clear what correct Christian teaching was. Some 56 years later, at another ecumenical council held in Constantinople, the bishops reaffirmed this expression of Christian teaching and made some further amendments to deal with subsequent heresies which had arisen from an over-reaction against Arianism. This resulted eventually in the so-called Nicene Creed we now recite – originating in Nicaea, but revised in Constantinople. When we compare it to the brief Apostles' Creed, we can see that it is more theologically complex, for it was devised by and is indeed in origin, "a creed for bishops" (to keep them on the straight and narrow).

And a first comment:

This little bit of history tells us three things.

First, that the Church believes that it is important that what we believe is true and correct, and also that we must continually respond to new misunderstandings or errors in belief. The Church has never accepted the idea that as long as you are sincere it doesn't matter what you believe. Perhaps the example of the belief in apartheid – a view of human beings and the world sincerely held by several million people in South Africa for many, many years – is sufficient warning to us about that. Beliefs matter and have consequences in the real world! We have seen this in recent events in the United States of America where false but sincerely held beliefs about electoral fraud led to an attempted insurrection.

Second, that we may have to understand old teaching anew in every generation. In the same way that the bishops developed and revised the Nicene Creed, we have to look at new understandings, challenges and errors in every new age. New issues arise. Over the last two centuries or so it has largely been about the challenge from the physical and natural sciences which rendered much of the language and imagery in which both Bible and Church talked about God and the universe, seemingly obsolete or out of fashion. Currently the universal Church is grappling with what to say about sex and gender.

Third, one can add another thought: the creed is silent about much Christian teaching and thinking. On the whole the Christian creeds have only targeted the theological essentials, particularly when they have been threatened. In other areas there is much scope for freedom of opinion and debate.

Prayer

Holy and loving God, beyond our comprehension and language,
help us to speak truly of you, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.
Guide us in our thoughts and beliefs
that we may act rightly in your creation
and put our trust in you, O God of truth. Amen

The Nicene Creed (Part 2)

Here I am going to concentrate on the first part of the Creed that speaks about God the Father.

We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

We believe in one God

When we say “We believe ...” we have to understand what is meant by “believe”.

It must not be taken as suggesting that God needs us to believe in him. That would be a bit like in the passage from the children’s book “*Peter Pan*” where Peter says: “Oh, no. Children know such a lot now. Soon they don’t believe. And every time a child says “I don’t believe in fairies”, there’s a fairy someplace that falls down dead.” That is ‘believing’ as if we are doing God a favour, keeping him alive, “Look God, **we** believe in you unlike those people who don’t.”

But to understand the meaning of “We believe ...” we must see the original context of all creeds – baptism. The creed was the candidate’s confession of faith, of trust, after a long period of preparation. It is not the intellectual acknowledgement of the existence of God (that is already long assumed). It is a statement of commitment, of our acknowledging that God is **our** God and that we accept him as our Lord, our sovereign.

Who or what is God?

Every culture and civilisation on earth has believed in something that is other, divine, greater than us, that inspires awe. That, in a general sort of way, is what one means by God, the divine. Throughout history we have seen many variations of such belief – from belief in many gods as expressions of this divinity (as in the Greek and Norse gods and in popular Hinduism), or modelled on the great forces in nature or in the human psyche, through to the great religions of the world. The major religions have all come to the understanding that this reality we call God is one and is the absolute essence of goodness and truth and the originator of all that is.

But we have a problem!

We are human. We are part of a material universe and we live in what appear to be four dimensions of space and time. We cannot think or conceive of anything (including God) except from within that limited set of dimensions. So we inevitably think of God as some **thing**. And there is nothing we can do about that. We do think in concrete images and preferably the human ones that we are familiar with. So there is no need to feel guilty about thinking of God the Father as looking rather like a grandfather and being up above the thunder clouds rather than down in the basement or underground parking garage. We can change the images, for example, God as a wind or an invisible field of power but pictures in our mind will still be concrete four dimensional ones.

It was the people of Israel who first understood that God was not to be contained within our images of him, that idols built by hand were parodies of the divine – indeed that one could not see God, ever. In the famous account in the book of Exodus of God appearing to Moses in the burning bush there is almost a sense of humour in God's refusal to be categorised and named:

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." [*Another translation is "I will be what I will be!"*] And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'"

The creed starts by affirming our commitment to this God who cannot be controlled or named, or even imagined by us. It makes three affirmations about God: he is like a Father, he is almighty, and he made the universe (in all its dimensions).

God the Father

[We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible](#)

The creed assumes we know that **God is Father**, for we have learned this from Jesus. The unknowable, unseeable, and literally inconceivable God is yet "our Father". The ultimate divine reality cares for us like a good parent. Jesus, who as a human being also conceived of God in concrete images, pictured God as Father, a figure of which most of us have a fairly positive experience. In the context of the time and place it is probably as positive an image as one could find. Not that one cannot also see God as Mother, as indeed the Old Testament often does.

This God who behaves like a Father is the “**maker of all things**”. The new Anglican Prayer book translation of all things as being both “seen and unseen” is inaccurate. Things can be material, visible and still unseen (your watch has fallen under the bed and you cannot see it but is not invisible). God is also author of all the truly invisible dimensions too. When the creed talks of heaven and earth it uses the cosmology the people of the time had – water under the earth and sea, earth, then sky, then waters above the sky, then heaven (or heavens). We now know that cosmology to be inaccurate as physical science. For us in the modern world it should simply be rephrased as the material universe and all other (to us) invisible dimensions of reality.

We might assume that saying God is creator is a simple statement-but it is not. Many of the world’s religions and some heretical offshoots from Christianity do not see the divine as the creator of the universe. They see the universe as a mistake, as an illusion or evil. Both Hinduism in its developed philosophical form and Buddhism see the world as like an illusion and full of suffering from which we have to escape. The Gnostic heresy that the Church struggled with in the past and the present saw the material world as evil and illusory. Indeed some of the gnostic heretics believed that the God of the Old Testament was actually a devilish demigod because he was the creator of an evil material world. Sometimes Christianity has had a bad press for being allegedly against the material world or sex. But comparison in fact it was the Church that defended the goodness of the material universe. So the clause about God as creator of this universe also counters what the Church did and still does see as errors.

Prayer (Jesuit prayer)

O Lord, grant us the grace to grow deeper in our respect of
And care for your Creation.
Lord, hear our prayer.

O Lord, help us to recognize the sacredness of all of your
Creatures as signs of your wondrous love.
Lord, hear our prayer.

O Lord, help us turn from the selfish consumption of
Resources meant for all and to see the impacts of our
choices on the poor and vulnerable.
Lord, hear our prayer.

The Nicene Creed (Part 3)

Here I am going to concentrate on the next part of the Creed that speaks about God the Son.

In yesterday's homily I mentioned that all the Christian creeds are developments of earlier shorter baptismal statements of faith in the Lordship of Christ. The earliest model for those is perhaps doubting Thomas's acknowledgment before the resurrected Lord (John 20:26-29):

"Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Thomas's affirmation also explains to us why the Church put enormous intellectual energy into explaining in words and imagery the meaning of Jesus of Nazareth. How does one say of a human being, Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth: "My Lord and my God". The Creed we recite tells us (in the language of the 4th Century AD) why we can say of Jesus: "My Lord and my God."

The Son of God

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into existence

This part of the Creed, like the first, also assumes that we have already been taught that the one true God has revealed himself as being threefold within his unity. Of course it would be so much simpler if we didn't have to face this paradox – that God is three in one. Islam doesn't have this problem, Judaism doesn't have this problem. And the cause of the problem is the carpenter from Nazareth.

If there was one slogan the early Church had it was the profession of faith: "Jesus is Lord!" (1 Corinthians 6:11 and 12:3; Romans 10:9, Acts 8:16; 19:5 and Philippians 2:11).

The use of the term "Lord" is significant. The word "Lord" appears over 700 times in the New Testament. The early Christians used a Greek translation of the Old Testament which translated the Hebrew name of God, "YAHWEH", as "Lord". (Where in many English translations we see the word "LORD" in capitals). So when the first Christians said "Jesus is Lord." they were also saying "Jesus is God." As Thomas said, "My Lord and

my God.” But in the context of the Roman world , it was also a political statement. Jesus Christ is my real Lord rather than the Emperor who thought of himself as a god. So the commitment involved in affirming that "Jesus is Lord" was by no means confined to obviously religious actions, it also meant a different way of life, a different attitude to politics and the economy. Jesus is Lord over this world too.

In early Christian belief, the concept of Lord included the pre-existence of Christ for they believed that if Christ is one with God, he must have been united with God from the very beginning.

The earliest disciples had to think very rapidly what to say about their experience of Jesus as the full revelation, the full image of the Father God. The term developed and used in the New Testament to express this is that 'Jesus is the Son of God'. Jesus of course talks constantly of God as his Father and when the apostle Peter states: "You are Christ, the Son of the living God" Jesus accepts the titles, thus declaring himself to be both Christ the Messiah and the Son of God (Matthew 16:15-16).

Those early disciples also had experienced the Holy Spirit that remained with them after Jesus ascended to the Father. How did they hold together their commitment to the faith in one God and yet make sense of what they had experienced? There were no easy answers. There was but one and only one true God. Yet that one God is experienced as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. John's gospel wrestles with the language: Jesus is the Word (the *Logos*) of God. He is God's self expression of himself. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was **with** God, and the Word **was** God." In the fullness of the time the Church develops a coherent theory of the trinity.

Of Jesus, the creed uses two types of language to express the affirmation that he is true God.

The creed first uses the very concrete imagery of paternity, of natural descent – Jesus is begotten, not made, not adopted, he is the real son.

Then it uses the language of contemporary Greek philosophy – the Son of God is of "one substance" ("one being" in the rather inexact Anglican Prayer Book translation) with the Father. He is not like God or similar to God, he is of the same one 'substance' or essential reality.

As in other parts of the creed, there are references to contemporary errors (heresies). The Son of God is not simply a part of, or the earliest part of, the creation. He is with God the Father "before all ages". He was not made. And he shares an identity with the Father as the creative force "through whom all things came into existence". There is no bad creator demigod and then a nice anti-the material universe Jesus as the gnostic heretics would have it. Jesus, the Son is one with the Father.

This part of the creed has often been seen as the most difficult, dealing as it does with the eternal nature of God.

But now the creed starts to describe what happens when the eternal enters time. This is the story of the incarnation, when God became human. When the Son of God

“because of us human beings and because of our salvation came down from heaven,
and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human.”

Prayer

Father of all,
Who gave us a universe in your Son
Who gave us yourself in your Son
We cannot grasp this by thought,
Enable then our love for your Son
So that we can grasp and hold,
And be held by the power of your Holy Spirit,
who reigns with you and your Son,
for ever and ever.
Amen

The Nicene Creed (Part 4)

This is the fourth homily on the Nicene Creed, the document which is accepted by most of the Christian churches: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist and other Protestant denominations as containing an agreed on formulation of the foundations of our understanding of God – Father Son and Holy Spirit – and in particular of our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God.

The creed, finally approved around 451 AD by bishops from all over the then known world, deals with three main matters:

- the eternal nature (we could say, the internal nature) of God,
- the interaction of the divine and human elements in Jesus Christ,
- and the interaction of the Holy Spirit and the Church.

In previous homilies I looked at the first parts of the creed which made clear that God the Father is creator of all that is and that “the Lord Jesus Christ”, the Son of God, is truly God – true God from true God, Light from Light.

In this homily I look at the coming among us of the Son of God in human form:

We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, **Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man**, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

What the Creed states is that what happens in time, in our material reality, this life of Jesus of Nazareth within history, is a making clear, is a full expression of, the Fatherhood of God, his love, his concern for human beings. God the Father acts within history, within time, by sending his Son. Because ... to save us!

Because of us men

Because ... "of us men". Because ... "of our salvation".

In the 1987 Anglican Prayer book this is translated as "For us and for our salvation".

But first a necessary digression on the English and Greek languages.

What does the creed mean when it talks about the Lord Jesus coming for "us men" and that he "became man". What about women? And does that mean that because he became a man no woman can, for example, as a priest truly represent him?

The English word "man" originally was not about "men"! Indeed one of the earliest recorded uses of the word refers to there being "two men in Eden". Before that a male adult was a "werman" and a female adult was a "wifman". But nowadays we tend to use the word "man" as if it referred only to male human beings, and, we, gender sensitive people, are constantly told not to talk as if "man" or "men" applied to both sexes. Indeed some recent translations of the Creed have gone to great lengths to replace the words 'man' and 'men' from the creed. Well, to sort this out, what does it say in the original Greek?

In Greek thought there was a myth that at the beginning the human being was a perfect spherical shape and combined both sexes in harmony – the Greek word for this original undivided human being was *anthropos* (from which come our English words such as anthropology). Then in some primal catastrophe the perfect harmonious *anthropos* was torn apart into separate male and female beings (and they have been trying to get together ever since, which explains the tremendous power but also the angst of the erotic drive of men and women for each other). Well the creed uses this word *anthropos* – not "male man" (*aner*). So Jesus became human for the sake of us "*anthropoi*" and was made "*anthropos*", he came for us all, all human beings, and he became a human being in its fullness.

So the nature of God is such that he is concerned with human beings. In the account of the revelation of God to Moses, the unnameable "I am what I am", mysterious and unknowable and inconceivable by our human minds, shows himself as lover of his human creation (Exodus 3: 7):

"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them ..."

Came down from heaven

The divine intervention of the incarnation of the Son of God in human form is, of course, expressed in the spatial terms of the science of the day – what can be described as a triple decker universe: water, earth, the heaven. This universe is created by God and is a unity. Earth and heaven (or the heavens) were seen, within the limitations of the science of those days, as all parts of the same universe with heaven or the heavens being

literally above the sky. If we had to formulate the creed today we would probably speak of dimensions or of a spiritual or invisible world as against a material world. But the Bible is very clear in its imagery that God is “higher” than the heavens. The highest comes **down** to our level. That is what is meant by “came down from heaven”. The “highest” becomes embodied within the confines and limitations of the material part of the universe – on the planet earth.

Was incarnate

What does “was incarnate” mean? Literally it means “put on flesh”. In the Bible “flesh” does not mean “meat” nor just the “physical body” – it means the complete human being, body and soul, in all its weakness, fragility and moral ambiguity. So God “came down” – the infinite consented to become finite, the timeless was subjected to time – and God “self-emptied” himself into human form.

The theologians of the early church wrestled with how to understand this and to avoid errors that would compromise what had been revealed to the disciples of Jesus, that the unchangeable God became truly one with a changeable, suffering and mortal human being. They could not explain the mystery, but they could point to bad explanations that contradicted what the disciples had experienced. There were many such false explanations:

- The man Jesus of Nazareth always existed. No. At a time in history, datable (kings and Roman officials are named), Jesus was born and God took human form.
- God and a human being get fused into some kind of new being. No. Because then Jesus the Christ was not truly human and human kind is not redeemed.
- God the Son simply inhabited the body of a man, like an alien mind in some science fiction movie animating a host human body. No. Because then God never really became human and human kind is not redeemed.
- God the Son and Jesus of Nazareth operate together, in a sort of partnership, each with their own minds and wills doing their own thing as appropriate. No. Because this really means that God did not become human and humanity is not redeemed.
- God really only appeared to be a human being. No. He was not an apparition or illusion as in the teaching of the gnostics.

The Creed does not explain how God became Man. Indeed in a sense it is a warning against all theories – we can never understand how God could become human, how the visible human life of Jesus of Nazareth is the expression of the God “come down” to save humanity.

The Creed is equally reticent about how we are saved by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are many “theories of the atonement”, more or less popular in different denominations, but we are free to believe all or none of them. All we have to affirm is that the coming of Jesus Christ was an divine act of salvation, or rescue, of liberation.

Incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary

The meaning of this clause is clear: the coming of Jesus the Christ has its foundation in the initiative of God. The coming of Jesus Christ is not the result of some natural development within the normal causal processes of everyday life. It is an intervention of the eternal God, a new beginning.

This clause often causes problems to modern people. This is partly because they do not understand why the clause was inserted into the creed in the first place. In those days the idea of some kind of special birth was not particularly novel. But there were various heretical cults, which we would now label 'gnostic', which disdained the material world and denied that Jesus had a human birth or that he had a truly human body! This clause asserts that Jesus was really born, from the womb of a woman through her vagina. He was thoroughly and truly human.

Prayer (Cambridge Offices and Orisons – E. Milner-White and B.T.D. Smith)

Litany of the Incarnation

Holy are you, O God, holy, Creator, Father most holy: have mercy.
Holy are you, O God, holy, most mighty, holy Incarnate: have mercy.
Holy are you, O God, holy, immortal, holy Life-giver: have mercy.

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace, good will toward mankind.

By the angel's greeting,
by Mary's glad obedience,
by the endless joy of Christmas,
by the love your mother Mary showed you,
by your lowly birth and lodging,
by your bed in a manger,
by the song of herald angels,
by the worship of poor shepherds,
by the offering of the Wise Men,
by your holy name of Jesus: grant us your peace.

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace, good will toward mankind.

Hear your children, O Lord God, and grant
that the glad light of the Incarnation may shine throughout the world,
that the gospel of your love may win the faith and worship of all hearts,
that all kinds of people may know and find their unity at Bethlehem,
that the questions of all minds and the desires of all souls may find their peace at
Bethlehem,
that your birth as truly human may hallow the life of all humanity,
that we may ever wear in honour the robe of flesh you have worn,

that you for whom an inn could find no room may not again be crowded from our lives,
that you for whom a stable-place sufficed will also dwell within our hearts: Son of Man, hear us.

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace, good will toward mankind.

Therefore with angels and archangels,
with patriarchs and prophets,
with Mary and Joseph,
with Wise Men and shepherds,
with all people and all creatures,
let us bless the Lord: Hosanna in the highest.

For to us a child is born.
To us a son is given.
The authority to rule will rest on his shoulders: Hosanna in the highest.

He will be named:
Wonderful Counsellor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace: Hosanna in the highest.

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God: Hosanna in the highest.

The Word became flesh and dwelled among us: Hosanna in the highest.

We have seen his glory,
the glory he has as the only-begotten from the Father,
full of grace and truth: Hosanna in the highest.

God the Father, our maker,
God the Son, born among us,
God the Holy Spirit, sanctifying us,
bless, preserve, and keep us, evermore and evermore. Amen.

The Nicene Creed (Part 5)

This is the fifth homily on the Nicene Creed, the document which is accepted by most of the Christian churches: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist and other Protestant denominations as containing an agreed on formulation of the foundations of our understanding of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and in particular of our Lord Jesus, Son of God.

In yesterday's homily I looked at that part of the creed dealing with the incarnation of the Son of God – true God from true God, Light from Light.

In this homily I look at what the Creed says about Jesus' historical coming among us.

We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, [and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;](#)

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

What the Creed gives us is a historical reference point.

Was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate

This is the exact historical reference point. The whole Creed has a precise, datable link to our history, our earth. There are many myths and salvation stories in the religions of the world. It is **this** story that is anchored in history. Myths and longings are now made real.

Rose again on the third day according to the scriptures

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was not a revival of a dead person, it was a transformation into an entirely new life. It must not therefore be confused with the revivification miracles within Jesus' own ministry. This resurrection is the foundation of the Christian faith.

The "according to the scriptures" can be open to misinterpretation. It does not mean "He rose again on the third day, well, at least, that what is claimed in the scriptures." Not at all. What is meant is that the rising on the third day was fully in accordance with what was said and prophesied in the Old Testament writings. This sense is beautifully expressed in Luke's account of the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the two demoralised disciples walking to Emmaus after the crucifixion (Luke 24:25-27):

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead

The ascension to heaven is expressed in pictorial language but is not to be understood as a change of position, as if he has levitated or beamed up into space. It is rather a change of mode of existence. Jesus is no longer visible to the first disciples – but he becomes in another sense available to all. The ascension finalises the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was God the Father's vindication of him. The apostles told the people of Jerusalem "God has made this same Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah." (Acts 2:36).

The ascension expresses that Jesus of Nazareth is now in the 'highest' with God the Father, risen to participate in the almighty power of God and to exercise rule over the whole universe. Jesus now has access to everything which belongs to God. His divine identity with the Father is confirmed, sealed. And humanity has been lifted up into God. God's gracious entry into human life was not for a time but for ever.

After the ascension, any distinction between the earthly Jesus of Nazareth and the future world judge foretold in prophecy disappears. In a way that judgement is already exercised, though it may only become manifest at the end of time. And for us Christians it is good to know that our judge is Jesus – who came down for us.

Of Whose kingdom there will be no end

The Kingdom of Christ, the Messiah, is identical with the kingdom of God. It is not some temporary phase within God. God did not turn into a man and is now back to himself as God the Father nor has he entered a new phase of being the Holy Spirit. The Son of God is eternal and therefore his kingdom is eternal. What Jesus of Nazareth showed of the nature of God will always be so.

This middle section of the Creed expresses a number of paradoxical things: but the greatest of these is that of the infinite God becoming finite. It has never been better said than in Paul's letter to the Phillipians 2:5-11:

Who, being in the form of God,
did not consider equality with God something
to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very form of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The Greek word for this humbling, this self-emptying of himself is *kenosis*. The Son of God, God's expression of himself, emptied himself in humility and self-sacrifice for the redemption and salvation of all humanity. Through that self-emptying we can share in Christ's divinity through grace. The Creed is Good News and the next two homilies will look at the final section of the Creed which looks at the life of grace under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer (Rafael de Val)

O Jesus! meek and humble of heart, Hear me.
From the desire of being esteemed,
Deliver me, Jesus.
From the desire of being loved,
From the desire of being extolled,
From the desire of being honoured,
From the desire of being praised,
From the desire of being preferred to others,
From the desire of being consulted,
From the desire of being approved,
From the fear of being humiliated,
From the fear of being despised,
From the fear of suffering rebukes,
From the fear of being calumniated,
From the fear of being forgotten,
From the fear of being ridiculed,
From the fear of being wronged,
From the fear of being suspected,
That others may be loved more than I,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may be esteemed more than I,
That, in the opinion of the world,

others may increase and I may decrease,
That others may be chosen and I set aside,
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,
That others may be preferred to me in everything,
That others may become holier than I,
 provided that I may become as holy as I should,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.

The Nicene Creed (Part 6)

This is the sixth homily on the Nicene Creed, the ecumenical Christian document formulated around 451 AD to express some key affirmations of the Christian church about its faith in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In this homily I look at the first part of the final paragraph of the Creed which speaks of the Holy Spirit and the life of grace lived in the Church under the inspiration of that Spirit. The Holy Spirit replaces the visible presence of Jesus (now ascended), and becomes the centre and support of the life of the church, the new people of God.

We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver

The Hebrew word for “spirit” was the same as that for “wind” or “breath” and expresses that this force, like wind, is invisible but powerful and irresistible. It is the power of God that is recognised from its effects – particularly when expressed through the men and women it possesses, such as the prophets. This Spirit is ‘holy’ in that it is awesome, numinous, set-apart. This holiness is also a holiness of righteousness and justice. In the Psalms and Wisdom literature this Spirit of God is seen as working in creation as a whole, breathing life into it. The Holy Spirit is the life-giver. It is also called the Wisdom of God and often seen as feminine. Later Old Testament and Wisdom literature has statements such as these:

Proverbs: 3:19 The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens.

Wisdom 7:22 talks of: “wisdom, the fashioner of all things”
and says that “in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible”.

Wisdom 7:24-26: For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.
For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

For the early Christians the coming of this Spirit had to do with the risen Christ and his continuing presence in the Church. As the giver of life, the Holy Spirit is the agent of the resurrection. The coming of the Spirit was seen as a foretaste of the end-time when the Spirit of God would be poured out upon the whole world.

In modern time the mainstream churches have tended not to talk much about the Holy Spirit, perhaps because of a tendency to focus on the humanity of Jesus. We pray to our Father and worship the crucified and risen one but are silent about the Holy Spirit. But correctly we should understand that wherever we are in any way related to the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit is there. “The Spirit is the present reality of God, the mode of the presence of the God of Jesus, whose power and kingdom is still to come, yet has already come to us in the sending of Jesus.” (Wolfhart Pannenburg). Our **experience** of God is of the Holy Spirit.

Who proceeds from the Father

These words come from John’s Gospel 15:36:

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me.”

What comes, proceeds from God, belongs to God’s divine being.

How does the Spirit ‘proceeding’ differ from the Son being ‘begotten’. We don’t know and theologians have tended not to speculate. The famous Catholic theologian and philosopher St Thomas Aquinas used an analogy to express the difference: God knows himself in the Son and loves himself in the Spirit.

The original creed had the words “Who proceeds from the Father”. Later, the Roman Catholic (Western) Church added the words “and from the Son” because they believed that logically if the Son of God is the perfect revelation of the Father, the Spirit must proceed from him too.

Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified

These words are pretty straightforward. What the experience of the people of God tells us is that the saving and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is the direct work of God. The language of scripture and the faith of the Church demands that we give the same honour and worship to the Holy Spirit as we do to the Father and the Son.

Who spoke through the prophets

The Church regards the inspired words of the Old Testament prophets as being the work of the Holy Spirit.

An important consequence of this is that we take the teachings of the prophets about injustice, inequality and corruption most seriously. Claiming to be living a Spirit-filled life and ignoring the prophetic message is a total contradiction.

Prayers

(Orthodox prayer to the Holy Spirit)

O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth,
Who is everywhere and fills all things,
Treasury of blessings and Giver of Life,
Come and live in us, cleanse us from every impurity
And save our souls, O Gracious Lord.

2 Corinthians 3:16-17

“But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

Holy Lord God,
May your Holy Spirit
open our eyes to true reality,
liberate us from the past by giving us repentance and forgiveness,
liberate us from egotism and selfishness so that our selves may be healed,
liberate us from injustice, exploitation, poverty and all social evil,
give us hope of the final liberation from decay and death,
free us to love neighbours and enemies and
send us out to live and work as our Lord did.
Amen.

The Nicene Creed (Part 7)

This is the seventh and last homily on the Nicene Creed, the ecumenical Christian document formulated around 451 AD to express some key affirmations of the Christian church about its faith in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; **in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

This final section of the creed speaks of the life of grace lived in the Church under the inspiration of that Holy Spirit, who is the centre and support of the life of the church, the new people of God.

In one holy Catholic and apostolic Church

Before going into the meaning of the words one, holy, catholic, apostolic and church, it is important to stress that in the New Testament the greatest sign of and gift of the Holy Spirit was the “fellowship” in the Church. The Greek word is “*koinonia*” for this sharing/communion.

It is the unity in the Spirit that characterises the Church, it is the unity of love. Indeed the Church spreads its message by presenting its unity and love through that *koinonia*.

Now to those words:

church: the word in Greek for church, *ecclesia*, translated the Old Testament term for the “congregation” (the gathering together of the people of God for common action). Jesus did not “found” the church, he renewed the “church” that had been the people of Israel (as is symbolically obvious in his having 12 chief disciples – representing the 12 tribes of Israel).

But this church is visible in the individual congregations gathered in particular places. There is no distinction between the Church as a whole and the Church as local gathering. There is the whole church of which every member and every local congregation is part – and St Paul calls this the Body of Christ. We can recall here that when Saul the persecutor of the earliest church received his vision of Christ, Jesus said to him “Saul, why do you persecute **me**?”

one: The Church is one, it is a unified fellowship. It is one body. This oneness is not a matter of church organisation. It is a given.

holy: To be holy is to be set apart, dedicated to the awe, the majesty of God. That sense of having some kind of separation from the sinful world is implicit. The way the church orders its common life and worship and actions must reflect the holy righteousness of God.

catholic: This term simply means universal, all-embracing, open to all. It is not a private sect or cult. It does not only admit the intellectuals or the rich or the powerful or a particular ethnic group. It does not discriminate against anyone. So the catholic church is the universal, open church going back to the days of the apostles. Later, long after this Creed was formulated, the term Catholic began to be applied to the Western (Roman) Church as distinct from the Eastern (Orthodox) Church and then later, after the Protestant Reformation in Europe to the Roman Catholic Church from which the Protestant churches had broken away. This is not the meaning of “catholic” in the Creed.

apostolic: This means that the Church goes back to the apostles (the Twelve) and is in conformity with their witness and teaching. In later times it was often associated with the idea that there was a continuity of ordination of bishops from the time of the apostles till now, the so-called apostolic succession.

We confess one baptism to the remission of sins

Baptism is a sacrament, that is, an outwardly visible sign of an inner spiritual grace. It is a sign that the believer has repented of sin and acknowledged that Jesus the Messiah has come and is Lord. Through it one is enrolled in the Body of Christ. Through baptism the sinner is identified with Christ – to share in the benefits of his life, death and resurrection. The words in the creed do not deal with the issue of infant baptism.

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come

To speak of resurrection means that death is real. At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees (unlike the Sadducees) believed that there would be a general resurrection of the dead and it is likely that the early Jewish Christians did too. But in many of Paul's letters there are references to disputes about resurrection – when would it occur, who was eligible and so on. These confusions may have been influenced by the common belief in the Mediterranean world of the time of the “immortality of the soul” (which is not the same as the resurrection of the full human being, spiritual body and soul). The creed is stating that in the world to come, we will be restored to full life.

The creed does not encourage us to speculate on what actually happens when we die. We do believe in the resurrected life to come, not because of theories about what happens to our soul or mind on death, but because we know, through Jesus, what God is like. We are safe in God's hands.

And to that, as to the whole creed, we are asked to affirm:

Amen.

Prayers (Book of Common Prayer)

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

Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you
through your Son Jesus Christ:
Inspire our witness to him,
that all may know the power of his forgiveness
and the hope of his resurrection;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

The Rainbow hope

Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

We are at a time when we are desperate for hope. At the beginning of the pandemic, in that first lockdown, though it was traumatic, we envisaged an end – maybe a month or two? – and then it would end. Now after nearly a full year there is no closure in sight and there are growing predictions that the rest of our lives will be in a Covid infected world. It is hard not to be depressed at the thought. Can we still hope?

Will there be a day when ordinary human interaction will be safe again. When we can hug, kiss, handshake, gather in groups, sing together, party together, dance together, share the peace together?

Will there be a day when the horrific inequalities in our own and world society – thrown into such harsh relief by the lockdowns and economic decline – are dealt with and ended?

Can we hope for that?

And now we are in Lent after what seems to us to have been a year of Lent, a year of giving up things – reducing our wants and needs. And the Church, in sticking to its liturgical year, is asking us to redouble our efforts, to get fit again – in body, mind and spirit. To have the will to do that, we have to have hope. We have to have a vision of something beyond disaster. Something that we want to be ready for.

It is not for nothing that the first reading for this first Sunday in Lent is the story of Noah and his Ark. It is a profound story that has been seriously misused as something attractive only for little children (though it then disturbs their faith later when they realise that it cannot be factually true – there was no universal flood nor could representatives of all earth’s living creatures fit into an ark, however big). It is really for adults – a story about disaster, about the threats to human existence. The actual story in the Book of Genesis is a reworked traditional story from Mesopotamia, about a no doubt real and catastrophic river flood there in ancient times when, in the words of one ancient Babylonian text “all of mankind had returned to clay”.

These disasters have affected humanity over the millennia. Floods, volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunami, and of course pandemics – the plague, smallpox, influenza, the Covid-19.

These disasters disturb our trust in God and the universe.

And the story of Noah and the Great Flood addresses that. And it tells us about the Rainbow of hope.

The book of Genesis starts with the initial state of the universe being one of watery chaos:

“the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

So the Flood is a kind of reversal, returning the creation to its pre-creation state of watery chaos. There is no longer a separation of land from the waters, land on which we humans can live.

The universe no longer looks to be stable and hospitable to life. This does not seem to be the universe that God “saw that it was good.”

So, in effect, the question is asked, “Can we trust God any longer?”

Yes, no doubt pious Noah and his family survive, but what about the rest of us? Think of those super rich billionaires who took to their ocean-going yachts when the pandemic first hit the Americas!

Well the story has a very strange and hopeful ending. God promises a rainbow. The rainbow is the sign that humanity (and all the living creation) will never be destroyed, creation will not be undone, but renewed.

We need to look very carefully at that picturesque image of the rainbow. It is God’s war bow set in the clouds. And it is pointing up – at God! God stakes his life on keeping his covenant with human beings. So, in the picture images in the story, whenever disaster is threatened, the bow reminds God of his promise.

So, Yes, disasters are a seeming reversal of creation, but God’s promise is the renewal of that creation.

It is a point well taken by writers in the New Testament. The Flood disaster story is seen as a warning about the final coming of the Son of Man and our need to be prepared, but also as a forerunner of salvation. The ark is the means of salvation – Christ and his Church is the ark. And the ark is also a symbol of Christ’s resurrection and our baptism, in which the old world is drowned, buried but we are raised to new life. As 1 Peter 3:22 puts it:

“And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.”

People of God, baptised sharers in the life of the resurrected one, in these dark days, look for the rainbow.

Prayers (Anglican Prayer Book Collect)

God of our salvation,
your bow in the clouds proclaims your covenant with every living creature:
grant us your Spirit,
renew us in our baptism,
and make us faithful stewards of your creation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.
Amen

Silence

Eleven months ago, when the Lockdown descended upon us, the silence was overwhelming – no cars, no buzz of people in the streets, nothing but the occasional bird call. Sad as that silence was, it was also good. Maybe in that silence, not just here but all over the world, we could begin to hear messages that we had ignored about our world, its people, the ordering of society, and the call of God. The only sound our own breathing in and out, in which, maybe, as Fr Mervyn pointed out last Wednesday, we could hear the holy name of God – Yah Weh (the LORD).

So in this penitential season of Lent let us return to listening to the voice of God in the silence.

Being silent is not easy. Externally, we have all the noise of the busyness around us. How can we hide from that? Internally we have the endless chatter of our thoughts, distracting us, gossiping to us, an endless monologue about ourselves.

How can we obey the words of the hymn?

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly-minded,
For with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

Well, the story of Elijah the prophet gives us some pointers on the discipline of silence.

First Elijah has to hide himself (Elijah was often on the run from the authorities). God tells him (1 Kings 17: 2-3)

“Get away from here from here and turn eastwards, and hide yourself”.

Can you hide yourself in some silence, even if only for a few minutes?

Elijah “went and did according to the word of the Lord” (1 Kings 17:5).

Second, it is in that silence, that hiddenness, that the Lord comes to Elijah, and guides his actions, including resuscitating a dying boy, whose sickness was so serious that ‘there was no breath left in him’ (shades of Covid-19!).

Elijah has to learn this practice of silence several times, overwhelmed as he is by the natural and political disasters of his day. He has to enter God’s workshop of silence and be quiet enough to hear.

There is the famous passage in 1 Kings 19:11-13 about Elijah, once again in hiding from the royal authorities and feeling very sorry for himself:

Then God said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

A delicate whispering voice.

If we are to hear that voice we must not be overwhelmed and distracted by the roaring and crashing of the natural disasters, the pandemic, the political elephants fighting and flattening the grass. We must enter into the silence.

It is not that we go silent to prepare for really praying with words. The silence is its own message. You are not trying to think, planning action, wanting something or trying to be something. You are nothing. The creative power of God is in that silence. The creative power of God will transform that nothing into what is truly real. That is what the Creator does!

And then you can answer God's question: "What are you doing here, YOUR NAME?"

Prayer

Lord, who speaks in a still small voice:

May I be silent before you.

May I not be in charge.

May I put aside my anxiety, my stress, my worries.

May I cease to magnify the world, my tasks, my struggles.

Open me to hear you in the silence.

Amen

Keeping going

We are now nearly into the fifth week of Lent and sometimes this long haul blurs into the day after day of the ongoing pandemic and lockdown. We ask, "When will this journey end, when will we be able to come out of this wilderness?" We wonder if we have the discipline to continue.

In Lent we commit ourselves to renewal – to become the people God created us to be. To become such people we have to recognize who we are, what our true selves are. And that is hard and challenging. For if we have truly looked into ourselves we will have seen much that is unlovely, unreconstructed, misdirected. Has our time in this joint world and church season wilderness enabled us to look into our hearts, summoned up a spirit of penitence and new resolve? Or have we been slackers?

We can look upon Lent as a training camp. Lots of exercises, some of which we have only a dim idea of how they may help us meet the future. Lots of exhortations to do better, try harder, last longer. Lots of advice on seeking the real truth, avoiding error, living justly. We wonder if the post training camp world can be any harder than what we are going through now, particularly if we seem to be failing.

But we have to recognize that we do hard things, struggle to obey commandments, try to discipline ourselves through deliberately staying in the wilderness, precisely because we need something greater – to receive and give love, and to be forgiven for our failures to give love.

As 1 John 3:18-24 puts it so simply:

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

God is greater than our heart. God knows our sins; but he also knows our temptations, our struggles, our sorrow, and our love.

So as we move forward in hope we can be confident that God is indeed greater than our hearts, greater than our fragile consciences. He pulls us forward and upwards with his Son, Jesus, who gave glory to his Father by doing his will in the present, however hard that was. And may our continuing lives, too, give glory to God right here and now.

Prayer

Lord, who knows our hearts:
may we listen to your call to glorify you by our lives,
may we be a visible show of your vision for all creation,
may we live trusting in your love,
that we shine in the darkness,
celebrate the wonder of life in you,
enliven your world,
care for your people in this world,
raised up by your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
forever.
Amen

Priests of creation

Hebrews 5:5-10

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

‘You are my Son,
today I have begotten you’;

as he says also in another place,

‘You are a priest for ever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.’

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Later in this week we will remember, commemorate – we can hardly celebrate – one year of lockdown. We think back to a year that has utterly transformed our lives ... and we and our families and everyone else will bear the scars for the rest of our lives.

We have been through all sorts of confusions, fears and doubts. We have been presented with a variety of false hopes and fake news and bombarded by self serving propaganda by people who put their own, or the interests of their class of people, above those of others, above those of humanity. When times are normal, at least relatively stable, we tend to assume that life is, on the whole, a good thing. In a time of pandemic we begin to doubt that – as our ancient ancestors did when the bubonic plague halved the population of most of the world.

It is in times like this that we ask ourselves, “What is the meaning of all this?”

This is not the same question as asking what we have to do to survive the pandemic. That we can find sensible answers to, adjust our behaviour accordingly, and hope that all our fellows will also act on that sensible advice – though of course not all do so and this is why it is inevitable that later on this year we will have a third wave of infections.

Neither is it much help trying to outweigh the doubts by looking at the pluses, the benefits, we have received from this international crisis.

For some benefits, though somewhat ambiguous ones, there have been:

- We have a slightly quieter, less polluted, less frenetic world.
- The mayhem caused by alcohol abuse that used to fill our hospital casualty wards every weekend was curbed for a year.
- We were jolted into a recognition that our lives really do depend on others, and particularly those who are seldom, in normal times, given recognition for being essential workers or worthy of living decent wages – the labourers on farms, the truck drivers, the supermarket shelf packers, and of course the nurses and teachers who kept things going.
- And our eyes may have been opened more to the everyday injustices of the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. During the pandemic it was the billionaires whose wealth soared even higher (the 680 American billionaires increased their wealth by 28% during the first six months of lockdown and the situation in South Africa was similar in this the most unequal society in the world) and maybe some of us will try and do more about it.
- And our eyes have been opened even wider – that is the result of the pandemic continuing – to see that our expectation that everyone would turn over a new leaf because of this common threat was dashed by the crooks, the corrupt and the tenderpreneurs getting up to their old tricks, looting the resources meant for face masks, sanitisation and other equipment. And of course the constant whining continued from the rich and upper classes about the inconveniences of the lockdown.
- And our eyes were opened even wider, if that is possible, when we saw that supposed religious belief does not necessarily protect people from being political idiots and betrayers of the message of Jesus of Nazareth – as was so vividly demonstrated in the United States of America when so called evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for a mass murderer, Donald Trump, whose lies and stupidity have probably more than doubled the number of Covid-19 deaths in the USA.

But none of this answers the question, “What is the meaning of all this?”

The New Testament reading for today comes from the letter to the Hebrews. This letter is not one most of us are familiar with, partly because its content and imagery deal with the relationship between the persecuted Jewish followers of Jesus and Judaism and the ritual of its temple.

Those to whom Hebrews was written were being told by doubters that Jesus could not really be the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures as he had not come and fixed everything. Indeed, he had been arrested by the Jewish leaders and crucified by the Romans. The Romans, the enemies of the people, were still in charge of Judah. The Jewish Christians were being persecuted. And although Jesus had been resurrected, he still left the earth and his people, who now face persecution rather than victory.

The Book of Hebrews faces this problem and these doubts head on. We are told that the Hebrew Scriptures also foretold that the Messiah would be a priest (although of a different sort than the traditional temple priests). Jesus came to fulfill this role, as a sacrificial offering to God, to atone for all humanity’s sins.

A priest represents the people and Jesus was burdened with all the weight of human sin laid upon him. It was a heavy load and the humanity of Jesus is evident in Jesus' own doubts and fears. As Hebrews (5:7) puts it:

'Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.'

And John's Gospel as well (12:27):

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – "Father, save me from this hour?"

The Father does not save Jesus from this hour. For as Jesus says (12:27):

"No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

The Son of God answers the call of the Father, he obeys God even if it leads to the cross. He offers his life to the Father. And in so doing glorifies the Father as he acts as the priest of all creation. And when he is lifted up on the cross he draws up all people to himself and salvation (John 12:32).

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

Hebrews (5:8-10) sums it up thus:

"Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek."

The tough news is that we share in that priesthood. Revelation 5:10 states:

"Through your blood you have made us into priests and kings."

and 1 Peter 2:9 says:

'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.'

And as his priesthood, God will not take us out of this pandemic. He will not "save us from this hour" – for this is our hour, our time, given to us on earth to show our obedience to God and to glorify God in what we do now, right now.

So we can repeat the words of Jesus:

"No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

The role of Jesus as King is yet to come. We his followers have to be patient and not be surprised at the suffering in the world of the present.

What we can do is be with Jesus the priest and in the words of Hebrews 13:12-15:

'Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. ... Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God.'

Prayer (Numbers 6:24-26)

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

A year of lockdown

Yesterday was the 365th day of lockdown. A whole year.

On the 27th of March 2020 I wrote:

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

Not much has changed since then – oh well, it has got noisier again. Given the slow roll out of vaccination – at the current rate the estimate is that it will take eighteen or more years to vaccinate most of the South African population – and that there is no assurance that new variants of the Covid-19 virus will not require annual vaccinations, it is likely that we will remain for the foreseeable future in some form of low-key lockdown. This is tough news. This is going to be a long war. And we will have to really struggle to maintain our humanness, our social and gregarious natures, in this environment.

I sometimes reflect on what it must have been like for our primeval ancestors, constantly on the lookout for predators, lions, wolves, and so on, every day of their lives. Our situation is in some ways worse, for it is not alien predators who may harm us, but our friends, our neighbours, our own families who may carry the deadly virus and unknowingly pass it on.

How do we maintain community, real human community, without being suspicious and wary of everyone, retracting into ourselves, not being open to others? And for children particularly very young children and teenagers, it is going to be so gruelling and limiting. The greatest danger is that we will get used to it, locked into this inner exile bubble.

At the start of this second year of containment we can perhaps reflect on what we have learned and what resolutions we failed to keep. We can ask ourselves what we will personally do to keep human interaction alive, even if it is by phone and internet. We can re-look at what we can do to help others who are less fortunate than ourselves in getting through this long hiatus in our collective life.

Writing 236 homilies over the last year enabled me to be in touch with all of you recipients and I want to thank you for making this possible by being you. And I wish to thank all those who responded with messages and queries. It was a great privilege to be in communion with you in this way.

I thought I would share evidence that I am a real person, but like you, in this time, isolated in the world. It was taken by my wife Jenny on the roof of the block of flats where I live during a heatwave and an Eskom blackout when I needed to work on my

laptop. I think the picture has much ironic symbolism – notably the host of satellite communication dishes all out of action. But above the stars still shine.

May the bright star of the morning continue to shine on you all.

Prayer (from the Easter Exultet)

May the Morning Star which never sets
find this flame still burning:
Christ, that Morning Star, who came back from the dead,
and shed his peaceful light on humankind,
your Son who lives and reigns for ever and ever.



Justin Martyr

As we enter the so-called Third Wave of the Corona virus pandemic in South Africa, which, in spite of the new reversion to a higher Lockdown level, we seem powerless to do much about, I thought to re-look at some past exemplars of the faith who had endured earlier waves of disaster and triumphed.

Today is the celebration of Justin Martyr, who was beheaded, together with some Christian companions and students, in AD 175. We know something about his martyrdom because a record of the trial before a Roman magistrate, Rusticus, has come down to us.

“The Prefect Rusticus says: Approach and sacrifice, all of you, to the gods.

Justin says: No one in his right mind gives up piety for impiety.

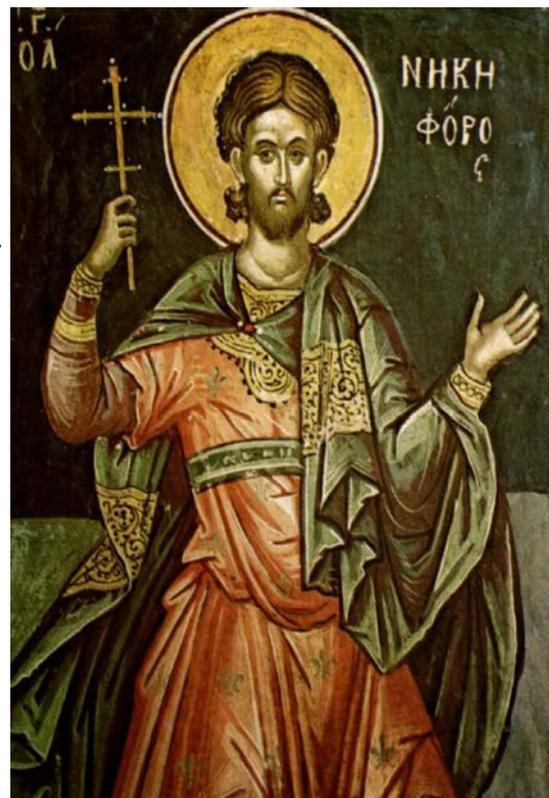
The Prefect Rusticus says: If you do not obey, you will be tortured without mercy.

Justin replies: That is our desire, to be tortured for Our Lord, Jesus Christ, and so to be saved, for that will give us salvation and firm confidence at the more terrible universal tribunal of Our Lord and Saviour.

And all the martyrs said: Do as you wish; for we are Christians, and we do not sacrifice to idols.

The Prefect Rusticus read the sentence: Those who do not wish to sacrifice to the gods and to obey the emperor will be scourged and beheaded according to the laws.

The holy martyrs glorifying God betook themselves to the customary place, where they were beheaded and consummated their martyrdom confessing their Saviour.”



Justin was a well-educated Samaritan gentile, who was left unsatisfied after trying out various philosophical teachings of his time – those of the Stoics, Pythagoras, and Plato, the latter for a time inspiring him as he thought it would enable him to perceive God. Finally he met and entered into a dialogue with a Syrian Christian who explained to him that the testimony of the Old Testament prophets was more reliable than the reasoning of the philosophers as they alone “both saw and announced the truth, neither reverencing nor fearing any person, nor influenced by a desire for glory, but speaking of those things alone which they saw and which they heard, being filled by the Holy Spirit.”

He became a Christian and a wandering Christian philosopher, ending up in Rome where he started his own school of philosophy. He had a very positive appreciation of the pre-Christian pagan philosophers and said that “true religion” predated Christianity

and that people such as Socrates and Plato were “unknowing Christians” and Christianity brought completeness to them. He wrote a number of defences, so-called ‘apologies’ of the Christian faith, and it from him that we have one of the first descriptions of how the early Christians celebrated the Eucharist:

“On Sunday we have a common assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or the outlying districts. The recollections of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us; he urges everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up together and pray.

On the conclusion of our prayer, bread and wine and water are brought forward. The president offers prayers and gives thanks to the best of his ability, and the people give assent by saying, “Amen.” The eucharist is distributed, everyone present communicates, and the deacons take it to those who are absent.

The wealthy, if they wish, may make a contribution, and they themselves decide the amount. The collection is placed in the custody of the president, who uses it to help the orphans and widows and all who for any reason are in distress, whether because they are sick, in prison, or away from home. In a word, he takes care of all who are in need.

We hold our common assembly on Sunday because it is the first day of the week, the day on which God put darkness and chaos to flight and created the world, and because on that same day our saviour Jesus Christ rose from the dead. For he was crucified on Friday and on Sunday he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught them the things that we have passed on for your consideration.”

Justin was fearless in the truth – “Whosoever is able to proclaim Truth and does not proclaim it will be condemned by God.” His martyrdom came after he was denounced to the authorities by a Cynic philosopher, Crescens, whom he had repeatedly bested in public debate.

Collect (for Justin Martyr)

Eternal God
by whose grace your martyrs Justin and his companions
triumphed over suffering and were faithful unto death:
move us by their example to deeper devotion
And perseverance in our Christian calling:
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Those who are falsely accused



Today is the day of remembrance of the 48 martyrs of Lyon in France who were victims of false accusations – false news – in that city in AD 177. Though there had been more massive persecutions (also driven by calumnies against Christians) in earlier times – one thinks particularly of Nero’s murderous pogrom of the faithful in Rome – the events at Lyon were so unspeakably horrible that the story has echoed down the centuries. It is also a particularly instructive story about the nature of false accusations and the banality of evil.

Over the last few years many devotees of President Trump, including in particular the conspiracy theory website Q Anon, propagated a story that the leaders of the Democratic Party and Hollywood film stars were a secret cabal of paedophiles who abducted, raped and drank the blood and ate the flesh of young children. Enough people believed this and other nonsense to mount a shambolic coup attempt in Washington DC on 6 January this year. False accusations lead to real and dire consequence, including deaths.

In the city of Lyon in Gaul, 19 centuries before, a groundswell of false information was being steadily spread about the small Christian community there. It first led to them being banned from entering public facilities such as the forum, market place and public baths. Christians would be assaulted, their homes broken into and looted. It all came to a head when news was circulated that the Christians were drinking the blood of children and eating their flesh and engaging in incest. Many of the faithful in Lyon and

neighbouring city, Vienne, were arrested, dragged to the forum, publicly interrogated, and imprisoned to await trial before the Governor.

Because of the large number of prisoners and the clamour of the mob the trial was held outdoors in the city forum. A well-educated member of the local gentry, Vettius, appalled by the mistreatment of the accused, tried to defend them against the bizarre claims, but was turned away by the Governor, asked if he was also a Christian, and when he admitted it, was summarily arrested. In the farce of a trial the mob surged forward and beat the 90 year old Bishop, Pothinus, so severely that he died in prison two days later. Several servants, though not Christians, had also been arrested and were tortured into giving evidence that the Christians were indeed cannibals and delighted in eating children and committing incest. All the Christians, including the non-Christians servants who had testified against them were sentenced to death.

The executions were delayed because one of Christians, like St Paul had been, was a Roman citizen. The philosopher Emperor Marcus Aurelius, that proponent of leading a simple, austere and virtuous life, happily ordered the execution of the persistent Christians.

There followed a ghastly sequence of hours of tortures both in prison and in the public arena before they finally died. Their captors were incensed by the Christians' refusal to recant and the tortures went on and on. We know the names of some of these martyrs: Pothinus the bishop, Sanctus a deacon, Vettius the advocate, Attalus, Maturus a professional athlete, Alexander a physician, Biblis, a woman who had temporarily weakened, but found her faith renewed under torture, Apollinarius, a 15 year old boy, and Blandina, a young servant-girl. Even under torture, none of the Christians would recant or admit to the accusations.

Now how do we know all this? A young man, Irenaeus, later to become bishop of Lyon and a famous theologian, managed to escape arrest and carried a letter with the account of the martyrdom to the churches in Asia Minor, an early exemplar of human rights journalism that tells the truth at whatever the cost.

The graphic description of the martyrdom of the saints is hard to read. Before howling spectators in the arena, the martyrs were put through mauling by wild animals, fire and other tortures. The author of the letter tells us that in the arena, the Christians "made manifest their nobleness by their patience and fearlessness and fortitude."

Blandina was the last to die, as described in the letter:

"Blandina was hung on a post and exposed as food for the wild beasts let loose in the arena, She looked as though she was hanging in the form of a cross, and through her ardent prayers she stimulated great enthusiasm in those undergoing their ordeal, who in their agony saw with their outward eyes in the person of their sister the One who was crucified for them, that he might convince those who believe in him that anyone who has suffered for the glory of Christ has fellowship forever with the living God."

Collect

Grant, O Lord, we pray, that we who keep the feast of the holy Martyrs Blandina and her companions
may be rooted and grounded in love of you,
and may we endure the sufferings of this life for the glory that shall be revealed
in us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Prayer

Lord we give thanks for the courage and endurance of all people who have
suffered from false accusations,
May we be strengthened to be resolute when this happens in our lives.
We also give thanks for all reporters, documenters and exposers of injustice,
persecution and corruption,
may their commitment to the truth be honoured.
Amen

Don't do that!

In a recent correspondence with an old friend we had a detailed discussion about when it is right for Christians to tell other people what to do. Can they condemn and directly oppose what other people, who may be only nominally Christian or even not Christian at all?

At a simple level, how central in Christian life should it be that we say to others: "Don't do this, don't do that!"? In the popular media Christianity is often caricatured as being exactly about that – that the Church is mainly about saying "Don't do this, don't do that" in relation to sexual behaviour and marriage customs (and perhaps, in South Africa, about political misbehaviour and corruption).

The question can be posed as "Is it our (Christian) job to actually prevent other people from doing what they want to do?" There are two possible answers. The first is to say "Yes, you should stop doing what you are doing!" and maybe even force them to stop if we can. The other answer is to say "No! That is not our task."

In the Western world, where increasingly morality is seen as a private, personal thing, this latter position is the one often taken, reinforced by the idea that everything is relative – morality, culture, identity, and even basic perceptions of reality and truth. Recent events in the United States of America showed how, when taken to extreme, this view could lead to people seemingly living in different socially constructed realities with the very idea of "truth" becoming totally detached from older ideas of 'fact'.

In local terms, if culture and morality are relative, if what is right and normal is dependent on culture or "tradition", it can lead to a merging of what the local Church thinks with the dominant ideas of everyday society, in fact they become indistinguishable.

A recent bill to be taken to the South African Parliament would legalise polyandry (that is marriage in which a wife can take several husbands). Looked at from a modern constitutional equality perspective, surely if men can have several wives, women should be allowed to have several husbands (screams of outrage from devotees of frozen-in-ancient-time African polygamy tradition to the contrary). It is precisely this sort of thing that shows us the complications of living in a world and country with different cultures.

Are there things that are universally right and some things universally wrong? One can reject that idea but then one cannot have it both ways and only approve of what you or your culture like. If all is relative then same sex unions, polyandry, polygamy, insistence on monogamy, prohibition of homosexuality, the death penalty, abolition of the death penalty, infanticide, ordination of women and cutting out girls' clitorises are all equally acceptable, dependent on cultural context.

If one does in fact believe in a high degree of universality in what constitutes good behaviour then one would have to make judgments (based on sound ethical and theological reasoning), and decide about these issues (though the judgments might be

quite nuanced (so one might accept polyandry but not female circumcision on the grounds that marriage relationships are often grounded in the economic necessities of a way of life whereas female circumcision is an assault on the bodily integrity and sexual functioning of human beings, etc.)).

Returning to the position of the Church and its members, it is probably right that there should not be an obsession to tell people “Don’t do this, don’t do that”. Rather it is to show by example – “This is what we do as Christians, this is what we do not do as Christians”. And if what Christians do and don’t do is not congruent with secular society, so be it.

It is instructive that there is nothing in the New Testament about the abolition of the death penalty, the ending of infanticide, or the stopping of lethal gladiatorial games (all practices major features of the Roman world). Yet within a short time no Christian could in any way be involved in executions and infanticide and the games were ended.

By the year 215 there were Church rules that baptism could be refused to those who were unwilling to do what Christians do and not do what Christians don’t do.

“If someone is a gladiator, or one who teaches those among the gladiators how to fight, or a hunter who is in the wild beast shows in the arena, or a public official who is concerned with gladiator shows, either he shall cease, or he shall be rejected. ...

A military man in authority must not execute men. If he is ordered, he must not carry it out. Nor must he take military oath. If he refuses, he shall be rejected.”

It is important what we Christians do rather than what we tell other people not to do.

In the next homily I will look at the vexed question of when Christians are called upon to intervene directly is stopping other people doing what they want to do.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
You who humbled yourself even to the extent of the disgraceful cross,
Have mercy on our pride, in ourselves, ‘our’ people, ‘our’ ethnicity, ‘our’ cultures.
Infuse your humility into our whole being
so that we may not condemn like the evil one and the Pharisee
but live our lives in your grace and be you in your grace to others.

Amen

Trains and mad drivers

The renowned German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, brutally executed in the closing days of the Second World War, is often described as a Christian martyr, though he did not die because of his faith as such but because he was connected to the plot to assassinate Hitler and remove the Nazis by a military coup d'état. We don't have a suitable category for such people, though the Russian Orthodox Church does, they call them "passion bearers", those Christians who die because they are the good guys in politics.

Bonhoeffer's teaching and the example of his life raise the important question of the right or duty of Christians to intervene directly in stopping other people doing what they want to do, because what they want to do is bad.

For some reason Bonhoeffer used transport images to convey his advice to us.

The first saying is short:

"If you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the corridor in the other direction."

If a whole society or nation is heading in a fundamentally wrong direction, living a simple, virtuous and pious life in a kind of 'Christian' bubble is not an ethical answer. As in Bonhoeffer's image, you are still on the train to disaster, even if your particular carriage or compartment is a 'holy' one. You have to somehow stop the train and get off or jump off if it cannot be stopped. Stopping the train requires that we engage with politics. Jumping off the train is increasingly impossible in the modern interconnected world – how many of us can conceive of becoming members of an Amish-like community.

The second saying is this:

"If I sit next to a madman as he drives a car into a group of innocent bystanders, I can't, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe, then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver."

And there is another similar one:

"We are not to simply bandage the wounds of the victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

In this context the injunction from Jesus "to turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:38-39) is often grievously taken out of context and misapplied as meaning that people should accept all and any abuse. In the time of Jesus the people of Palestine were subject to Roman colonial rule. They were considered inferior. Being struck on the cheek, by say a

Roman soldier or a tax collector, was not just violence but an insult to persons of inferior status – the colonised, slaves, women, children. Offering the other cheek was in fact an assertion – go on, hit me again if you like – I am standing my ground, I am your equal, I have my own dignity, even if you have the physical and legal power to beat me. So the call to turn the other cheek is in fact a very subversive statement and in no way contradicts the need for Christians to sometimes take direct political action on behalf of neighbour to stop the multiple forms of “mad driver” who cause the misery and chaos, the corruption and the abuse, in the world today.

Prayer (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)

God of endless love,
ever caring, ever strong,
always present, always just:
You gave your only Son
to save us by the blood of his cross.

Gentle Jesus, shepherd of peace,
join to your own suffering
the pain of all who have been hurt
in body, mind, and spirit
by those who betrayed the trust placed in them.

Hear the cries of our brothers and sisters
who have been gravely harmed,
and the cries of those who love them.
Soothe their restless hearts with hope,
steady their shaken spirits with faith.
Grant them justice for their cause,
enlightened by your truth.

Holy Spirit, comforter of hearts,
heal your people's wounds
and transform brokenness into wholeness.
Grant us the courage and wisdom,
humility and grace, to act with justice.
Breathe wisdom into our prayers and labours.
Grant that all harmed by abuse may find peace in justice.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

Boniface and the oak tree

About the year AD 723, an English missionary bishop to the pagan Germans, Winfrid, later renamed Boniface, was faced with a problem. Many of the converts in the region were:

“not yet strengthened in soul, refused to accept in their entirety the lessons of the inviolate faith. Moreover some were wont secretly, some openly, to sacrifice to trees and springs; some in secret, others openly practised inspections of victims and divinations, legerdemain and incantations; some turned their attention to auguries and auspices and various sacrificial rites; while others, with sounder minds, abandoned all the profanations of heathenism, and committed none of these things.”

With advice from the more resolute of the converts Boniface decided to take action:



“the saint attempted, while the servants of God stood by his side, to fell a certain oak of extraordinary size, which is called, by an old name of the pagans, the Oak of Jupiter. And when in the strength of his steadfast heart he had cut the lower notch, there was present a great multitude of pagans, who in their souls were earnestly cursing the enemy of their gods. But when the fore side of the tree was notched only a little, suddenly the oak's vast bulk, driven by a blast from above, crashed to the ground, shivering its crown of branches as it fell; and, as if by the gracious compensation of the Most High, it was also burst into four parts, and four trunks of huge size, equal in length, were seen, unwrought by the brethren who stood by. At this sight the pagans who before had cursed, now on the contrary, believed, and blessed the Lord, and put away their former reviling.”

Nowadays past missionaries often come under attack from modern academics for not accepting indigenous culture, beliefs and superstitions (which they themselves, of course, have not the slightest belief in). It is a complex matter, often mixed up with issues about the links between missionary activity and the activities of warring or colonial powers. It was no different in the time of Boniface – there was an ongoing power struggle between the Franks who had half-heartedly embraced the Christian order and the German Frisians who were pagans. Boniface had a rather turbulent relationship with the Franks and he tried to ensure that the church maintained some independence in appointing its own bishops. The Franks were willing to tolerate this as long as Boniface succeeded in converting the German tribes.

It was on a missionary trip to Frisia in AD 754 that his party was attacked by bandits. They were heavily outnumbered and Boniface ordered them not to resist: “Cease

fighting. Lay down your arms, for we are told in Scripture not to render evil for evil but to overcome evil by good." Boniface and his companions were killed. The bandits were dismayed that the luggage contained religious texts, not gold or silver. They attempted to destroy the books, three of which survived.

Boniface has the unusual honour of being venerated as a Saint by the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Anglican Communion and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Prayers of St Boniface

Eternal God,
the refuge and help of all your children,
we praise you for all you have given us,
for all you have done for us,
for all that you are to us.

In our weakness, you are strength.
in our darkness, you are light,
in our sorrow, you are comfort and peace.

We cannot number your blessings,
we cannot declare your love:
For all your blessings we bless you.

May we live as in your presence,
and love the things that you love,
and serve you in our daily lives;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us stand fast in what is right,
and prepare our souls for trial.
Let us wait upon God's strengthening aid
and say to him:
'O Lord, you have been our refuge in all generations.

Note: Today also being World Environment Day in our liturgical calendar I must report that no indigenous trees were harmed in the writing of this homily.

Daimons and the family

Mark 3: 20-35

Then Jesus went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.

When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' — for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Preceding this perplexing Gospel text for today is Mark's description of the appointment of the twelve disciples. The twelve have three characteristics. They are:

- to be with Jesus
- to be sent out to proclaim the message
- to have authority to cast out demons

Look at two of those things the twelve have been asked to do:

proclaim the message – so what is this message that has caused this furore described in the passage above?

Well we know what that message was. "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near." Think of the Lord's Prayer. "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven." The reign of God is being realised.

demons are to be cast out – what was so exciting and revolutionary about that? We can easily misunderstand this if we think only of lurid exorcisms of evil spirits that have driven people mad. Mark's gospel was probably originally written for people in Rome, and we must remember that most people in the Mediterranean believed that the entire world was infused with spirits, forces, powers – ranging from minor nature spirits to huge forces that ruled nations. They were what the Greek language calls “daimons” and were not necessarily evil, which is what our English translation “demons” suggests. What these daimons/demons did do, however, was to continually influence and control human and natural life at all levels, individual, familial, national and international. The dramatic change the Gospel message brings is liberation from the control of daimons at personal and societal level and indeed all levels.

Later, when the Christians were persecuted in the Roman world, the acid test which would see them condemned to death was whether they would worship and own allegiance to the daimon (in Latin, the “genius”) of the Emperor. But they had been freed from subjection to any daimonic powers and they refused.

This liberation from the daimonic control was most clearly seen in the ancient baptismal rite developed by the early Church.

First the candidates would be exorcised. Then they would face the West and formally renounce their allegiance to the daimonic world.

Then they would turn to the east and formally give their allegiance to the new world of the Christian faith, taking the oath of the baptismal creed.

Christians belong to a new world, a new nation, a new family.

Understandably, the old world, the old nations, and the old families are not very happy with this.

So, going back to Mark's description – Jesus and his group are besieged by crowds of people coming to the house where they were staying. Why have they come, what has caused this near riot?

Jesus' own family arrive and hear some people saying that Jesus is out of his mind and they want to physically restrain him.

The Scribes, the lawyers of Jewish society, arrive and say that Jesus is only able to cast out demons because he himself is controlled by the ruler of the evil demons, Beelzebul. Jesus has then to argue with them in a legal-type argument that they can understand. If demon is now against demon then the power of demons is disintegrating and he suggests that if he is able to exorcise demons (“plunder the property” of the big demon himself, Beelzebub) then Jesus must have acted “first tying up the strong man”. The liberation that the Gospel message brings is precisely that of liberating us from the various things that control us.

[As an aside, the sin against the Holy Spirit is described by Jesus as calling what is of God (himself, the gospel message) evil. It is an unforgivable sin because if you call good evil, you cannot recognise good, and grace, and forgiveness. The Scribes have called Jesus an agent of Satan. They literally cannot see the good right in front of them.]

And then comes more of the good news.

Jesus' earthly family arrive outside the house and call for him. Jesus tells his listeners that in this new world his listeners, his disciples are "my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." This is the new family in God.

It does not of course mean that Jesus was not devoted to his earthly family – he cared for his mother, even when he was dying on the cross, and at his resurrection appeared to his brother James who became a leader of the young Church in Jerusalem.

But in God's eyes you are Jesus' family. Look around you. You are the brothers and sisters of Christ, because you have been liberated from subservience to the daimonic world powers, you have been birth-registered in a new world, nation and family. With your brothers and sisters, do the will of God on this earth as it is done in heaven.

Prayer

Lord victorious over evil and death,
breaker of the gates of Hades,
saviour and liberator of all:
keep us safe in the power of our baptism,
secured and free in your divine family,
unchained from all evil and corrupting influences;
so that we may truly do your divine will in the world
and love all creation with your love.

Amen

Boniface writes on leadership

A number of readers of these homilies were intrigued by the story of Boniface and one contributed a copy of a letter written by Boniface in AD 747 to Cuthbert, the Archbishop of Canterbury back in England.

In the letter Boniface provides a profound meditation on the difficulties in establishing and maintaining the Church in Germany and of the obstacles he was encountering. It is piercing in its honesty and can be applied without difficulty to the Church in all ages. Indeed it could be applied to most human enterprises and particularly to the challenges facing leadership.

My dear brother, I fear we have undertaken to steer a ship through the waves of an angry sea, and we can neither succeed in our task, nor without sin abandon it. I am reminded of the statement of a certain wise man that "If it is dangerous to be negligent when steering a ship on the open sea, how much more dangerous to let go of the rudder in a storm when the waves running high. In her voyage across the ocean of this world, the Church is like such a great ship, pounded by the waves of temptation, and it is our duty not to abandon ship, but to control the rudder.

As examples in this, we have the early Fathers, Clement and Cornelius and many others in the city of Rome, Cyprian in Carthage, Athanasius in Alexandria. Living under pagan emperors, they steered the ship of Christ, that is the Church, his most dear spouse, teaching, defending, labouring and suffering, even to the point of shedding their own blood.

In the Church of which I have oversight, I have dug the ground over, manured the soil, but I am conscious that I have failed to guard it. Alas, all my labour seems to me like a dog barking at the approach of thieves and robbers, but because he has no one to help him in his defence, he can only sit there, whining and complaining.

According to the word of God to Ezekiel, when someone is entrusted with preaching the gospel, even though he live a holy life, nevertheless, if he is afraid or ashamed to rebuke those who live wickedly, he will perish with the rest because he remained silent. When I consider the example of such people, and those like them, I am filled with dread. *Fear and trembling come upon me and the darkness of my sins overwhelms me.* I would be only too glad to give up the task of guiding the Church which I had accepted, if I could have found some warrant for such a course of action in either the example of the Fathers or in Holy Scripture.

Since this is not to be found, and since although the truth may be attacked, it can never be ultimately defeated or falsified, with my tired mind, I take refuge in the words of Solomon: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insights. In all your ways, think on the Lord and he will guide your steps.*

Let us stand firm, then, in doing what is right and prepare ourselves to face trials. Let us wait upon the strength of God, and say to him: Lord, you have been our refuge from one generation to the next. Let us trust in the One who laid this burden upon us. What we cannot bear on our own strength, let us bear with the help of the One who is all-powerful and who said, *My yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

Let us never be dogs that do not bark, or silent bystanders, or hired servants who flee at the approach of the wolf. Instead let us be watchful shepherds, guarding the flock of Christ. And as God gives us strength, in season and out of season, let us preaching to the powerful and powerless alike, to rich and poor alike, to all people of every rank and of whatever age, the saving purposes of God.

Prayer

Lord, maker of disciples and appointer of the Twelve,
look with favour on all who hold positions of leadership
and guide them in all they do.

Give them courage and insight to face all difficulties
And always to seek truth and justice
and never to protect or hide wrongdoing.

May leaders trust in you who choose them
and bear your yoke with joy.

Amen

Third waves

I am probably as uncertain as you are as to whether we are about to enter, or are already in, the so-called third wave of the pandemic. It is not that we are ignorant of the concept that contagious diseases may come in waves – we are thoroughly used to the idea that every winter there will be more colds and influenza around, and this happens year after year. But the reason for these annual waves helps explain why we are having these more than annual Covid-19 waves of infection.

Cold and influenza germs are around us all the time but in winter we huddle indoors (like in the current cold spell in South Africa) and close the windows. We are therefore making it easy for those cold and flu germs to benefit from that close human-to-human contact. Covid is exactly the same, but more aggressively so. The attempts to halt infections centre around the need to minimize close human contact (and we use masks and sanitizer when we are entering that proximity zone). If you have too much human interaction another wave will assuredly come.

Our first hard lockdown, the really strict one, was simply meant to try and stop any wave of infections at all. It failed, as others did in most parts of the world, though because ours was done quickly enough, our first wave was not as catastrophic as it could have been.

Our second wave came because the lockdown was eased and people increasingly ignored the need to avoid too much human interaction. It was a typical result of multiple factors – simple lockdown fatigue, the need for people to return to work to earn a living and keep services going, and the greed for business profits, for example, the alcohol industry used their lobbying power over government in spite of the factual evidence that selling booze brings in about R98 billion to the economy each year but the cost of harm caused by alcohol – lack of productivity, drunkenness, alcoholism, crashes, social disruption, overburdening of hospitals – is estimated at R277 billion.

The third wave will be caused by exactly the same factors and particularly by the growing lockdown fatigue – people find it very difficult to sustain the required discipline. The reason for the uncertainty about whether the third wave is here is because our statistics are unreliable and are probably gross undercounts of the infections and deaths. In a more ideal world, the immunity of those who were infected and recovered and the vaccinations would together eliminate the threat. But the vaccination numbers are still totally inadequate and millions of South Africans do not want to be vaccinated because they believe the lies endlessly propagated through the social media. We have a very real problem. A number of research studies have shown that false information is passed more efficiently and swiftly by the social media than the true and that the young, the media wise experts, are in fact less able to distinguish the true from false in them than are their elders.

So we will probably have a succession of waves though their force will gradually decline.

So what are we to do?

Disciples are meant to be disciplined. We are under the discipline of protecting ourselves and others. That is what the Bible says. We have to endure and not put others at risk and we have to be aware that others may be putting us at risk. It is as simple as that. And we have to rigorously counter false information.

And there is still good to be done and the very nature of our society needs to be changed politically. How can this not be the case? The latest statistics tell us that “As many as 10 million adults and nearly three million children experienced hunger in the past week in South Africa in 2021, and 2.5 million adults and 600,000 children were experiencing perpetual hunger, hunger every day or almost every day.”

Prayer (From The Valley of Vision, A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions)

My little boat sails on a restless sea,
Grant that Jesus may sit at the helm and steer me safely;
Allow no adverse currents to divert my heavenward course,
Let not my faith be wrecked amid storms and shoals;
Bring me to harbour with flying pennants,
hull unbreached, cargo unspoiled.

I venture on you wholly, fully,
my wind, sunshine, anchor, defence.

The voyage is long, the waves high, the storms pitiless,
but my helm is held steady,
your Word secures safe passage,
your grace wafts me onward,
my haven is guaranteed.

This day will bring me nearer home,
Grant me holy consistency in every transaction,
my peace flowing like a running tide,
my righteousness as every chasing wave.

Help me to live circumspectly,
with skill to convert every care into prayer,
Surround my path with gentleness and love,
smooth every harsh temper;
let me not forget how easy it is to cause grief.

May I strive to bind up every wound,
and pour oil on all troubled waters.

May the world this day be happier
and better because I live.

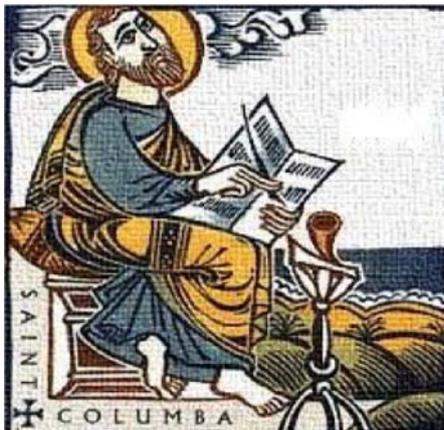
Let my mast before me be the Saviour's cross,
and every oncoming wave the fountain in his side.
Help me, protect me in the moving sea
until I reach the shore of unceasing praise.

Columba of Iona

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit us the pessimists saw it as a sign that civilization as we knew it was about to end. It has not quite come to that but there are times when people do wonder whether the end of civilization is arriving.

Today is the feast day of a remarkable Irishman who perhaps epitomises how civilization is sometimes saved just in time. In the midst of what is conventionally called “the Dark Ages” in Europe there was a blinding light in the Christian Church of Ireland and in a man called Columba who lived from 521 to 597. It was the case, as is elegantly summed up the title of a book by Thomas Cahill, of “How the Irish saved civilization”

Ireland had been converted to the faith by Saint Patrick a century earlier. While the Roman empire in Europe was disintegrating, Ireland blossomed as a centre of learning. It was then that Columba was responsible for spreading the Gospel to Scotland. He did more to spread the Gospel than any other of his contemporaries.



Columba (meaning Dove), original name Crimthann (meaning Fox), was a nobleman of royal descent but he chose to become a monk and an extremely energetic one, founding 41 monasteries in all before he was forty. He was a striking figure of great stature and powerful build, with a loud, melodious voice which could be heard from one hilltop to another. But he also had a wild, passionate, intense side. He was the best poet of his time and he loved beautiful books. He first got into trouble as a student when he secretly copied a beautiful book of psalms and kept it. He was found out and in humiliation had to return the copy.

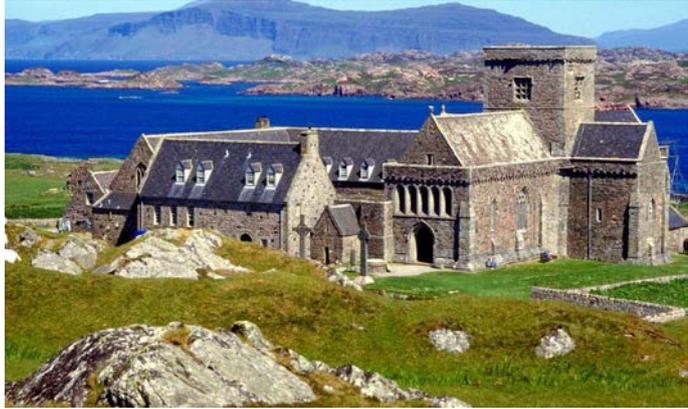
In 560, after about fifteen years of productive ministry, he got involved in a royal feud between his king and the high king of Ireland. His involvement may have been partly motivated by his resentment about the book-copying affair. The immediate cause was that a relative, a prince, who had killed somebody in game of hurling (a sort of blend of hockey, soccer and rugby) and sought sanctuary at Columba’s monastery, was dragged out and killed. Columba played a part in mobilizing the military response and over a thousand people were killed in the subsequent battle in 561.

For a time Columba was excommunicated, the usual punishment for a monk who had taken up the sword. His own conscience was also uneasy.

The upshot was that Columba went into lifelong exile with twelve loyal companions on a mission to the wildest part of the earth as far as the Irish were concerned, across the sea to Scotland, populated by Picts and some Irish settlers.



Columba eventually settled on a tiny island off the west coast of Scotland, Iona, where they studied, farmed, copied religious and secular texts, and went out to evangelise. Iona soon became a magnet attracting converts. Every time it exceeded 150 monks in number, a group of 13 monks would be sent out to start a new centre. By the time of his death, there were sixty communities and he had created a literate, Christian society among the Picts and Scots. Soon his followers began to evangelise the English of Northumbria (from the soon to be equally famous eastern island of Lindisfarne) and then they went on to Europe and brought literate civilisation back to it.



The abbey at Iona today

Columba in fact did once return to Ireland, to a meeting on a matter of the rights of the Irish Scots not to pay tribute to the Irish high king and to defend the traditional Irish bards (poetic storytellers) who were facing banishment by the ruling class for their insolence and satire. This led to a reform of the bards who came to play an important role in preserving Ireland's history and literature.

Poems of Columba (he is the patron saint of poets)

Be O Lord,
a guiding star above me,
a smooth path below me,
a kindly shepherd behind me
and a bright flame before me;
today, tonight and forever. Amen.

Exile song

Delightful to me to be on an island hill, on the crest of a rock, that I might often watch the quiet sea;
That I might watch the heavy waves above the bright water, as they chant music to their Father everlastingly.
That I might watch its smooth, bright-bordered shore, no gloomy pastime, that I might hear the cry of the strange birds, a pleasing sound;
That I might hear the thunder of the long waves against the rocks, that I might hear the sound of the sea, like mourning beside a grave;
That I might watch the splendid flocks of birds over the well-watered sea, that I might see its mighty whales, the greatest wonder.
That I might watch its ebb and flood in their course.
That my name should be – it is a secret that I tell – “he who turned his back upon Ireland”;
That I might have a contrite heart as I watch, that I might repent my many sins, hard to tell;
That I might bless the Lord who rules all things, heaven with its splendid host, earth, ebb, and flood...

Boat song

Cut in the forests, swept down the two-horned Rhine,
Our keel, tight-caulked, now floats upon the sea.
Heia, men! Let the echoes resound with our heia!

The wild gusts swell, the slashing torrents fall,
But manly strength has force to tame the storm.
Heia, men! Let the echoes resound with our heia!

To earnest effort, clouds and tempest yield;
Zeal and unceasing labor conquer all.
Heia, men! Let the echoes resound with our heia!

Endure and save yourselves for better things;
O you who have suffered worse, this too shall end.
Heia, men! Let the echoes resound with our heia!

So when the loathsome foe assaults our hearts,
Tempting and shaking the depths of our hearts with passion,
Let your souls, men, remembering Christ, cry heia!

In resolution fixed, scorn Satan's wiles.
By virtues armed, defend yourselves with valour.
Let your souls, men, remembering Christ, cry heia!

Firm faith and holy ardour conquer all.
The ancient fiend, defeated, breaks his arrows.
Let your souls, men, remembering Christ, cry heia!

The Source of Good and Being, the Highest Power,
Offers the warrior and gives the victor prizes.
Let your souls, men, remembering Christ, cry heia!

Book song

That I might search the books all,
That would be good for my soul
At times kneeling to beloved Heaven –
At times psalm singing;
At times contemplating the King of Heaven
Holy the chief;
At times at work without compulsion
This would be delightful.
At times plucking seaweed from the rocks
At times at fishing;
At times giving food to the poor;
At times in a cell:
The best advice in the presence of God
To me has been vouchsafed.
The King whose servant I

Helper of workers

O helper of workers,
ruler of all the good,
guard on the ramparts
and defender of the faithful,
who lift up the lowly
and crush the proud,
ruler of the faithful,
enemy of the impenitent,
judge of all judges,
who punish those who err,
pure life of the living,
light and Father of lights
shining with great light,
denying to none of the hopeful
your strength and help,
I beg that me, a little man
trembling and most wretched,
rowing through the infinite storm
of this age,
Christ may draw after Him to the lofty
most beautiful haven of life
... an unending holy hymn forever.
From the envy of enemies you lead me
into the joy of paradise.
Through you, Christ Jesus,
who live and reign.

Astonishment

The Old Testament reading for today is the account in 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 about Samuel's anointing of David as king and the Gospel reading (Mark 4:26-34) is about seeds growing into great things.

Most of us are familiar with the such stories and parables in the Bible and by simply taking them as straightforward stories and messages we gain a lot.

That first reading is a story about the aged priest-prophet Samuel finding and anointing a suitable successor to Israel's first king, Saul, who had been something of a failure. It's an engaging story and all younger siblings of older brothers and sisters will gain some pleasure in seeing the older ones get their comeuppance and the insignificant, the youngest, the servant boy shepherd, David, chosen.

Then there are the parables of the seed and the mustard seed. They are insignificant things, thrown into the ground but they turn into great big things – the seed becomes the harvest, the mustard seed a large tree. So from small beginnings the kingdom of God spreads and grows.

Now we can leave it at that but at times it is helpful to look deeper at our Bible and try and see the patterns and the deeper messages there. What kind of God are we dealing with and how is he dealing with us?

And it seems to me that what comes out when you look at the Bible in this way is that God is an astonishing God – a God who interacts with human beings in ways that they cannot predict, cannot control, can only dimly comprehend. And that is wonderful, God is an eternal, wonderful surprise (though of course we can be initially angry at our loss of control and our ignorance).

Take that story of Samuel anointing David.

Samuel is a real heavy in the kingdom – a very important person, the religious guide and mentor of the king. When he arrives in Bethlehem the local people are terrified. What does this important agent of the kingdom want with us? We know his king, Saul is a bit out of his mind, so what has he instructed this man to do to us?

And now it gets interesting. Samuel, the king's man, is in a sort of depression about how things have gone wrong in the country because of Saul. And God interrupts this depression, this self obsession with what has gone wrong, and tells Samuel to get up and go and anoint a new king – because that is what God wants to happen in Israel's history, God reacts to how human's behave. And that is astonishing, that God, the creator of the universe, is interested in the events of a minor little kingdom.

Samuel is not overly excited by the idea – God is putting him at risk. And that is also interesting. This God asks us to take risks (God himself will in the fulness of time take the greatest risk of all in becoming human in Jesus).

Then, as the story unfolds, we come to understand that the Bible, and indeed its God, has a sense of humour. [It is not for nothing that great poem by Dante on our salvation is called “The Divine Comedy”, a comedy that seems to start as a tragedy but ends well and gloriously.]

One son of Jesse after the other comes before Samuel and is rejected. They have all sorts of great qualities – appearance, height, seniority in age, whatever. But this strange God tells Samuel:

“The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

And so finally, the youngest son, not thought even worthy of consideration, he is a lowly shepherd, is summoned and chosen.

Is there a pattern showing itself here? This God is one who is not, as they say, “a respecter of persons” – he chooses those whom human choice often rejects or ignores, the young, the poor, the humble. We see this on a large scale in God’s choice of a people to spread the truth about him to the world, an insignificant people in a country decidedly in the wrong place and continually messed up by its more powerful neighbours. God does not choose a powerful nation with a profound religious tradition – Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, China – but he chooses a cantankerous bunch of primitive ex-desert nomads. We see the same pattern in the choice of David, rather than the royal family of Saul – this God is not a respecter of rulers either.

If we see this pattern, in one Bible story and passage after another, we must expect to be a bit confused and astonished. God gets up to all sorts of things that we cannot predict. He does not choose the safe and the obvious. He chooses what the world often rejects and ignores.

I am often reminded of the famous story about the dictator of the Soviet Union, Stalin, who was told that the Pope was denouncing him. “How many legions of soldiers does the Pope have?” he asked. Very realistic in worldly terms but the wrong question in God’s universe.

The parables about the growth of the Kingdom of God using images of seeds, reveals the same pattern. God can work with the small, and indeed, generally he seems to prefer to. Small seeds grow into rich harvests.

Christians in the modern world often feel somewhat marginalised and insignificant. What can they do? Attend church Sunday by Sunday, pray, do a bit of caring for others that never seems to be enough (think of the estimated 2.5 million adults and 600,000 children who experience perpetual hunger, hunger every day or almost every day, in South Africa)? What influence do we have on events and the way things go in the country and world?

But we do not know what this astonishing God can and will do. Jesus tells us that the smallest seed may grow into the biggest tree. Trust in the holy one of Israel to turn small things into great ones, to raise up the humble and give them the inheritance of the earth.

That seems to be the way God works. It seems to be the way he is.

Christian art has invariably represented its saints and apostles as looking out on the world with wide open eyes. That is right. They are looking with astonishment on the ways of the Lord. They are always gloriously surprised.

Prayer (Pope Francis)

May the Lord grant us the grace to encounter Him,
but also to allow ourselves to encounter Him.
May He grant us the grace, which is so beautiful,
of this astonishment at the encounter.
And may He give us the grace of having in our life
the two-fold confession:
'You are the Son of living God; I believe it.
And I am a sinner; I believe it.'

Basil and his companions

We are in a time when hospitals and care for the poor are priorities. It is therefore good that the Anglican Church in South Africa commemorates St Basil and his companions, who included his brothers, Gregory of Nyssa, Naucratius, and Peter of Sebaste, a sister, Macrina the Younger, and a close friend, Gregory of Nazianzus.

They were a remarkable Christian family and group and St Basil was a major influence on the shaping of the Christian liturgy and the creator of the first hospital, properly so-called, in the world - that is, one that provided in-house patient facilities and professional medical caregivers for free.

Basil, usually called Basil the Great (330 - 379) was extremely well-educated in law and rhetoric in Caesarea in Cappadocia, Constantinople, Athens and Rome, where one of his fellow students was to become emperor Julian the Apostate. According to his close student friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil had a brilliant mind, a seriousness of character and only associated himself with the most dedicated students. He mastered rhetoric, grammar, philosophy, astronomy, geometry and medicine. He was heading home towards a stellar academic career in Caesarea, which was itself a centre of learning. But on his return there his life changed radically:

“I had wasted much time on follies and spent nearly all of my youth in vain labours, and devotion to the teachings of a wisdom that God had made foolish. Suddenly, I awoke as out of a deep sleep. I beheld the wonderful light of the Gospel truth, and I recognized the nothingness of the wisdom of the princes of this world.”

First, he distributed his personal wealth to the poor and explored becoming a hermit, but he was called to a more communal form of life. He travelled the middle east looking at religious communities, and was for a time part of the community his sister Macrina had founded. His writings became a formative influence on monasticism in the East. He was also a sophisticated theologian and even before he was ordained as deacon, he had attended a Council in Constantinople in 360 which debated issues around the wording of the creed.

Basil's initial monastic inclinations were overruled and he was summoned by the Bishop of Caesarea to be ordained a presbyter there. Apart from, with his friend Gregory, combating the Arian heresy in public debates, he was for some years the administrator of the city.

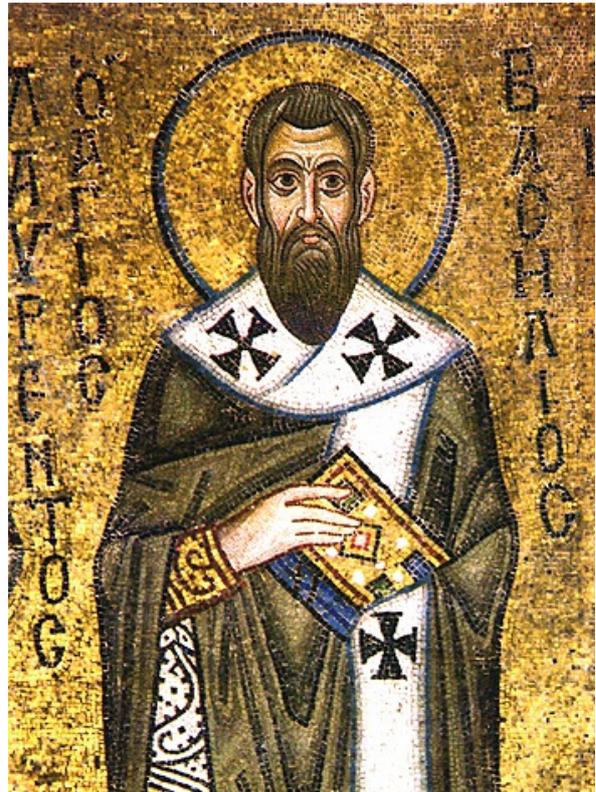
Basil built a great hospital for the housing and relief of travellers, the sick and lepers, and for the industrial training of the unskilled. It provided professional medical treatment, bedcare and food, all at no charge. It was known as the “new town” and did enormous work during the famine and drought in Caesarea in 368.

In 370 Basil succeeded to the bishopric, which was an important one – in effect he was the Archbishop of Cappadocia and he had fifty chorepiscopi (rural suffragan bishops) under him.

Basil's Christian principles led him to active intervention in what we today would call politics, not always without opposition and danger, because Basil believed in creating the conditions of "our sovereigns treating the authority of the people with respect". It had become the general approach of the Church to build up the strength of the local commune and create real local self-government.

Already in 372 the Governor of Cappadocia denounced Basil for setting up the large and important hospital for the poor – perhaps because it was a constant reminder to the wealthy of what they ought to do. Basil openly denounced the emperor Julian the Apostate and later negotiated face to face with the Emperor Valens in an attempt to prevent the division of the province of Cappadocia and the general impoverishment which this was clearly going to bring with it. The emperor was astonished at Basil's firm and calm indifference to his status and wishes.

His friend Gregory of Nazianzus was of like mind and made a successful attempt to dissuade the Governor from a policy of wholesale reprisals after the people of Nazianzus, driven to exasperation by taxes and fees, had revolted in 373. Basil's brother, Gregory of Nyssa said that "Food for just labour" is the Christian requirement.



His death in 379 was mourned by all, Christians, Jews and pagans.

Perhaps Basil's most enduring legacy is his articulation of the fact that all people are equal and share the same human nature and all are dependent on God. He saw that human beings are social creatures and an interactive communal life and generosity are essential, as shown in these quotes from sermons and homilies:

"But how do you make use of money? By dressing in expensive clothing? Won't two yards of tunic suffice you, and the covering of one coat satisfy all your need of clothes?... One bread-loaf is enough to fill a belly.... For it is right... to regard the use of money as a matter of stewardship, not of selfish enjoyment.... What answer shall you make to the judge, you who dress walls, but will not clothe a man; who spruce up horses, and overlook an unfashionable brother; who leave grain to rot, but will not feed the starving; who bury your money and despise the oppressed? ... "To whom am I unjust when I keep what is mine, asks the rich man." My response: "Tell me, which things are yours? Where did you get them from at the beginning of your life? It is like someone who has a seat in the theatre, and who objects when others also take their places. He claims that he owns what is for the common use of all. So too with the rich. They claim in advance that which is common property and make themselves the owners of it. Moreover, if everyone acquires what they need and leave the excess over for the destitute, then there will be no rich and no poor. Did you not come naked out of your mother's womb? Are you not going to return naked to the earth? Where did you get your present possessions from? If you say 'from fate,' then that makes you an atheist who neither acknowledges your Creator nor gives thanks to your Benefactor. If you acknowledge that they came from God, then tell me the reason why He gave them to

you. Is God unjust that He gives the things of life to people unequally? Why are you rich while another is poor? In any case, is it not so that you can receive the reward for good and faithful stewardship, and the other can receive the reward for his patient effort? But you, who grasps at everything in your insatiable greed, do you really think that you are doing nobody injustice by plundering so much? Who is the greedy one? The one who is not satisfied with that which is enough. Who is the plunderer? The one who takes that which belongs to all. Are you greedy? Are you a plunderer? The one who steals clothes off someone's back is called a thief. Why should we refer to the one who does not clothe the naked, while having the means to do so, as anything else? The bread that you have belongs to the hungry, the clothes that are in your cupboard belong to the naked, the shoes that are rotting in your possession belong to the barefooted, the money that you have buried belongs to the destitute. And so you commit injustice to so many when you could have helped them."

Prayers of St Basil

Compassion for Creation

O God,
enlarge within us the sense of
fellowship with all living things,
our brothers and sisters
the animals to whom you gave the earth
as their home in common with us.

We remember with shame that in the past
we have exercised the high power of man
with ruthless cruelty
so that the voice of the earth,
which should have gone up to thee in song,
has been a groan of pain.

May we realise that they live not for
us alone but for You
and that they love the sweetness of life.

Lord of the powers

O God and Lord of the powers, and maker of all creation, who, because of your clemency and incomparable mercy, did send your only-begotten Son and our Lord Jesus Christ for the salvation of mankind, and with his venerable cross did tear apart the record of our sins, and thereby did conquer the rulers and powers of darkness; receive from us sinful people, O merciful Master, these prayers of gratitude and supplication, and deliver us from every destructive and gloomy transgression, and from all visible and invisible enemies who seek to injure us. Nail down our flesh with fear of you, and let not our hearts be inclined to words or thoughts of evil, but pierce our souls with your love, that ever contemplating you, being enlightened by you, and discerning you, the unapproachable and everlasting light, we may unceasingly render confession and gratitude to you: the eternal Father, with your only-begotten Son, and with your all-holy, gracious, and life-giving Spirit, now and ever, and to the ages of ages.

Cutting down trees

I have already mentioned Boniface's cutting down of a sacred tree. It seemed to be something of a habit among the missionaries and new converts in Europe (apart, of course, from the general human practice of cutting down forests for agricultural purposes and which, Europe having been largely denuded of the woodland that once covered virtually the whole continent, is now continuing as the great jungles of South America and West Africa are destroyed).

But this specifically 'liturgical' cutting down of the tree shrines of traditional religions raises all sorts of questions related to what the relationship is between the Christian faith and other religions and practices.

If one starts with the Old Testament it had a pretty negative attitude to other religions for both religious and moral reasons. The Old Testament thoroughly denuded the cosmos of any other gods (they were just dead man-made idols), and whilst they had great respect for the ancestors, direct communication with them was forbidden, as was all kinds of witchcraft and magic. "You shall not allow a witch to live." comes straight out of the Old Testament law alongside more positive commandments such as "You shall neither harass a foreigner nor oppress him (Exodus 22:18-21).

When the first Christian mission to the gentiles started, apostles such as Paul had a certain respect for previous pagan beliefs (Paul: "I observe how exceedingly reverent you are toward the daimons in everything; For as I was walking along and looking over the objects of your devotions I even found an altar on which was inscribed, "TO A GOD UNKNOWN."") But Paul at the same time insisted that whatever spirits and powers existed in the universe – these daimons (spirits, powers, forces) in everything – they were subservient to God and Jesus had liberated all humanity from being under their control, and he says: "What you revere in ignorance, therefore, this I announce to you. The God who made the cosmos and everything in it, this one – being Lord of heaven and earth – does not dwell in sanctuaries made by hand."

So one can see that the cutting down of a tree in a pagan sanctuary might be seen as an acted out parable showing that the Christian was liberated from and was safe from all the other powers in the universe.

There is exemplified in a wonderful account in Bede's *History of the English Church and People* of an incident in the Christianisation of my heathen English ancestors.

A missionary is asked by one of the Anglo-Saxon kings to address his leading advisors, including the heathen high priest, on this new Christian religion. The high priest, Coifi admits frankly that in spite of his devotion and service to the pagan gods it has not done him much good, or given him greater honours. If the new teachings are better, he will consider them. Another advisor likens human life to a sparrow flying into a warm banqueting hall at night out of a raging winter snowstorm and out again into the darkness. "If this new teaching can reveal any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it." They decide to accept the new faith.

What follows is remarkable and I will quote the passage in full:

“Coifi then added that he wished to hear Paulinus’ teaching about God in greater detail; and when, at the king’s bidding, this had been given, the High Priest said: ‘I have long realized that there is nothing in what we worshipped, for the more diligently I sought after truth in our religion, the less I found. I now publicly confess that this teaching clearly reveals truths that will afford us the blessings of life, salvation, and eternal happiness. Therefore, Your Majesty, I submit that the temples and altars that we have dedicated to no advantage be immediately desecrated and burned.’ In short, the king granted blessed Paulinus full permission to preach, renounced idolatry, and professed his acceptance of the Faith of Christ. And when he asked the High Priest who should be the first to profane the altars and shrines of the idols, together with the enclosures that surrounded them, Coifi replied: ‘I do this myself, for now that the true God has granted me knowledge, who more suitably than I can set a public example, and destroy the idols that I worshipped in ignorance? So he formally renounced his empty superstitions, and asked the king to give him arms and a stallion - for hitherto it had not been lawful for the High Priest to carry arms, or to ride anything but a mare - and, thus equipped, he set out to destroy idols. Girded with a sword and with a spear in his hand; he mounted the king’s stallion and rode up to the idols. When the crowd saw him, they thought he had gone mad - but without hesitation, as soon as he reached the temple; cast a spear into it and profaned it. Then, full of joy at his knowledge of the worship of the true God, he told his companions to set fire to the temple and its enclosures and destroy them. The site where these idols once stood is still shown, not far east of York, beyond the river Derwent, and is known as Goodmanham. Here it was that the High Priest, inspired by the true God, desecrated and destroyed the altars that he had himself dedicated.”

This certainly gives a rather different perspective to the current fashion of decrying the past attitudes and approach of missionaries and their converts to traditional beliefs. Changes in belief are often disruptive of traditional practices and ways of doing things but can also be liberating and joy-bringing. It is interesting that this account already show how the new faith was dissolving some of the hierarchical stratification in the old society in which the king was all important.

Prayer

Lord of love and enlightenment,
be with us whenever we share the Gospel with others.
Help us to be sensitive to their beliefs and practices
however different they seem to ours;
Enable us to endorse the good and avoid the bad,
and distinguish the true liberation of the Gospel
from the forms and limitations of human culture.

Amen

The Church growing trees



Ethiopia has a large rural population, probably about 70 million, and they are served by over 35 000 churches. What is remarkable about these churches is that each one is surrounded by a small forest. The churches have been described as being scattered like emerald pearls across the brown sea of farm fields.

The Ethiopian highlands were once thickly forested, but, as happened in Europe, they were cut to make way for fields and cattle pastures. In modern times Australian blue gums were planted for timber and firewood, as they were in South Africa, but they helped dry up the lands even further. It was only the churches that preserved the remnants of the original natural forests and the biodiversity that was once there.

The forests are protected by the religious officials and the communities around them. The priests, monks, nuns, and hermits are the sacred guardians of their country's last remaining forests. The priest is generally responsible for maintaining the church at its centre, while the local people use the forest ecosystems for firewood, honey, freshwater and cattle grazing.

Churches in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition owe much of their traditions to those of Judaism. The centre of each church building has, like the Jewish temple, a holy of holies which only the priest enters. Enclosing this space is a larger circle, where the people receive communion, and then another circle wherein people chant. And outside the circular church building itself is a circular low-walled courtyard (forty angels armspan from the church!) and then the forest, indicating that this is a sacred sanctuary.

In the current global ecological crisis, the Ethiopian Church forests are gaining increasing attention as vital reserves of living things and which, suitably protected and enlarged, could help reforest Ethiopia. Many priests have now started building an outer wall around the forest, or expanding existing walls both to stop cattle encroaching and

destroying young shoots but also to encourage the forests to reach further. Thinking of many rural churches in South Africa situated in bleak dusty wastelands, turning church grounds into forest sanctuaries has much to recommend it.

This video give a good brief look at the attempts tp preserve the Ethiopian Church forest sanctuaries:

<https://youtu.be/8fGe-CPWZIE>

Prayer (Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake)

Creator of the Universe,
you call us to be keepers and tenders of this Garden of the Earth,
our common home.
Among the trees in this Garden is the Tree of Life,
with all its wondrous beauty, biodiversity,
and intricate interdependence.
Creator of all life,
Inspire us with faith to answer a sacred call to preserve
and defend the intricate web of life for all beings.
Guide us with wisdom as we seek ways to love our neighbour
through our loving acts of restoration.
For present and future generations,
may we be known as healing humans
who live in balance and harmony with your whole Creation.
Amen.

Bernard Mizeki

On Wednesday I received a notice from the Diocese saying that the Enrolment Service of the St Bernard Mizeki Guild, scheduled for this Saturday, had been cancelled due to the new lockdown level 3 restrictions. Who is this Saint? Well he is in the Church calendar for today as on it, in 1896, Bernard Mizeki, translator, catechist, missionary and evangelist was martyred in Mashonaland, now part of Zimbabwe.

Mizeki, original name Mamiyeri Mitseka Gwambe, was born in Inhambane, Mozambique in 1861. As a young boy he found work with a European trader and after the death of his mother, he went by ship to Cape Town, where he worked for ten years as a labourer and stevedore, living in a slum there. He observed the disastrous effects of drunkenness on his co-workers, refused to drink alcohol and remained uncorrupted by his surroundings. He began to study at a night classes at an Anglican school run by teachers from the Society of Saint John the Evangelist (the Cowley fathers) and a German missionary Fraulein von Bloemberg, became a Christian and was baptized. Eventually he mastered English, French, high Dutch, and at least eight local African languages. He was soon involved in helping translate Anglican church texts into African languages.

He then accompanied Bishop Knight-Bruce to Mashonaland to work there as a lay catechist. In 1891 the bishop assigned him to Nhowe, the village of paramount-chief Mangwende, and there he built a mission complex, farmed, learned the local language, opened a school, and began to gain converts, including some from the paramount chief's homestead. He was assisted by a pupil, John Kapuya, and a Zulu catechist, Frank Ziqubu.

He then, with the Chief's permission moved his mission station up onto a nearby fertile plateau, next to a grove of trees considered sacred as inhabited by spirits of the tribe's ancestral lions. He angered some local religious leaders when he cut down some trees while preparing a field to plant wheat and carved crosses into others. However it seems that Mizeki was generally sympathetic to the Shona Spirit religion. He developed an approach that built on people's already monotheistic faith in one God, Mwari.



In March 1896, Mizeki married Mutwa, an orphaned granddaughter of Mangwende who was a Christian convert preparing for baptism. Mizeki was thus admitted into the Mangwende's kinship network, which some resented.

But 1896 also saw an uprising by the Ndebele against the British South Africa Company colonists, which eventually spread into the Mashonaland area. The traditional religious leaders played a significant part in encouraging the rebellion.

Whether Mizeki's death was collateral to the rebellion (and therefore not strictly speaking a martyrdom) or more influenced by local religious and tribal family antipathies is unclear. Mizeki had on occasion been asked to interpret at trials in Salisbury (Harare). He had been warned to flee but was adamant that he worked for nobody but Christ, and he would not desert his converts or his post.

Chief Mangwende son, Mchemwa, ordered Mizeki's death and on the night of 18 June, he was dragged from his home, stabbed and left for dead. His wife found him, badly wounded. He told her to flee but she went to seek aid. By the time she returned the attackers had returned and killed him and done away with his body, for it was never found. The mission was also destroyed.

Mizeki's wife claimed that while she went to get help she saw a brilliant white light, seen by others as well, shining all over the hillside where he lay, and a great noise "like many wings of great birds".

Today the site of Bernard Mizeki's home is a major religious shrine not only for Anglicans but also for other Christians in Zimbabwe and the memorial service held on 18 June is attended by thousands of people.

In South Africa the Bernard Mizeki Men's Guild was established for Anglican lay men to promote and encourage the participation and nurturing of men's leadership in the life of the Church and was particularly well-supported by Xhosa-speaking migrant workers. Bernard Mizeki Guilds spread across South Africa. Guild members wear purple waistcoats and a special badge. Anglican migrant workers could identify with Bernard Mizeki as a fellow migrant who sacrificed himself for Christ. Members of the guild aspire to make the annual pilgrimage to the Mizeki festival in Zimbabwe.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God,
who kindled the flame of your love
in the heart of your holy martyr Bernard Mizeki:
Grant to us, your humble servants, a like faith and power of love,
that we who rejoice in his triumph may profit by his example;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Interruption

I have just this evening listened to the President speak to the nation. The Covid-19 'Third wave' is already smashing into Gauteng with disastrous impact and the worst may be yet to come. We are now in adjusted Level 4 lockdown. The pandemic has drastically interrupted our lives for more than a year and it looks like that interruption (or interruptions) will continue.

This made me reflect upon the reading from Mark's Gospel in today's service – an account of two healings (Mark 5:21-43), or more precisely a healing and a revivification.

We, particularly those of us lucky enough to be on medical aids and able to get to the better doctors and hospitals, sometimes don't think very much about Jesus' healing ministry, except of course when we are up against something the doctors and surgeons and antibiotics cannot fix, such as cancer or Alzheimer's. We can thank the Church for this because it invented hospitals in the modern sense more than 17 hundred years ago. In the time of Jesus there were no hospitals, no ambulances, no antibiotics, no vaccines and Jesus's capacity to heal was one of the things that drew the crowds to him and enabled people to hear his message of the coming of the Kingdom. No wonder Mark often describes crowds thronging around Jesus.

Here is the text:

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So Jesus went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He

allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Mark's story is a curious one, because it is a dramatic story about a truly desperate father seeking help for his dying daughter that is interrupted by another story about a shamed bleeding woman seeking help. It is significant that the parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke also combine the two stories, though otherwise these writers were usually quite happy to rearrange the information and stories they had about Jesus. Why is this? What was so important about the combining of these two stories? Of course, this may be the sequence of what actually happened, but we can still ask, 'What connects the two stories so firmly in the Gospel writers' minds?'

Let us start with Jairus's daughter. It is significant that we do not know the daughter's name. In ancient times, and indeed up until the rise of modern medicine and hygiene, children and particularly girl children were not considered important until they survived childhood because so many of them died. In the Roman world children were not often given names until they were past infancy – no point in investing heavily in them, emotionally and materially, until they were older. So it is very interesting that this particular father goes out and seeks the healer Jesus to come and save his daughter – a girl, still a child – "My little daughter". Now Jairus was a leader in the synagogue. If he was from the synagogue in the city of Capernaum it is quite possible that he had already heard Jesus preach. Was his mindset already undergoing some transformation as a result?

Before we can get our own minds around that question, the story is rudely interrupted by the woman with a continuous flow of blood, sneaking up on Jesus in the crowd as she seeks healing by touching the fringe of his coat.

There is reason for her acting this way. She was ritually unclean. According to the taboos of Jewish society, blood and particularly menstrual blood was unclean. So this woman had been ritually unclean for twelve years, barred from Temple and local synagogue, if she was married, barred from sexual intercourse (and therefore likely to be divorced), barred from touching a man, and no man would eat food cooked by her. Anything she sat upon would have to be washed.

One can imagine the scene. This important person, a leader in the town, comes and asks the healer to come immediately and save his daughter. The crowd rapidly follows, eager to see what happens. And the woman uses this opportunity to get close to Jesus.

She was, I think, a young woman (Jesus calls her 'daughter') who had been sick for twelve years (the same length of time that Jairus's daughter had been alive) – she was unnamed, destitute (all her resources had gone on failed medical costs), unclean,

forgotten and an outcast. She can only hope to get near to Jesus in the anonymity of the crowd, whatever the risk that she might be recognised, shamed and chased away.

Why does she touch Jesus' clothes, or as Matthew and Luke specify, the edge of his cloak. Jewish men of this time wore a cloak with a fringe of tassels in accordance with the prescriptions of Old Testament law (Numbers 15:38-40 and Deuteronomy 22:12) and there was a superstitious belief that the tassels of a holy man possessed magical powers. [Mark, incidentally, corrects any possible misunderstanding of this healing as magic, by insisting that it is the woman' faith that has evoked the healing.]

Jesus stops for her. This is important: **Jesus stops for her.** Jesus does **not** continue on his way to Jairus's house. He stops and seeks out the person who reached out to touch him. He does not push her away because he is in an emergency rush to get to heal the important leader's daughter. He made Jairus wait, while he spoke to the woman and the crowd. Upon discovering who touched him and why, he declares, "Your faith has healed you".

Then the original story resumes. Jairus' s servants arrive. They do not speak to Jesus, he who has delayed coming to the sick daughter. Rather they quietly tell Jairus that his daughter is now dead.

Jesus overhears this conversation and encourages him to have faith. One can imagine Jairus's feelings. Grief at the news? Anger perhaps that Jesus did not make his daughter the priority? Resentment that an unclean outcast came first?

But Jairus too makes a desperate act of faith. He goes on with Jesus back to his home.

When they get there, Jairus's people are incredulous. Maybe they had never favoured Jairus going off to seek help from this wandering healer who has already been denounced by Temple and synagogue leaders. But the child is dead! Mark puts it bluntly – they laughed at Jesus.

Jesus ignores the skepticism, the laughter, the mockery (he will get that too on the Cross). He concentrates on the young girl.

And he now breaks another rule. He touches a dead body (and is according to the Law unclean for seven days).

Jesus took the parents and his three disciples in, tenderly took the child by the hand and said: "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" She rises and Jesus tells them to give her something to eat.

So there we have the example of our Messiah, our Lord, our healer. He puts us first, whatever our status, our importance, our authority. He breaks all taboos and restrictive cultural practices to bring healing. He welcomes faith, whether it be the faith shown by an outcast or a person of high status in society.

Jesus shows that this is a God who can be interrupted. There is no timetabled set of appointments with our God, no waiting list, no registrations to get in the queue.

I found a wonderful quotation about “interruptions”. It came from a man who at the end of his life said: “My whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.”

Indeed in Jesus’ response to this interruption we see what God is like. We can even surmise that Jesus constantly interrupts what we can think of as an overall mission plan – because he responds to the immediate human need for healing and liberation. His own life is interrupted by the forces of evil on the cross, and through that interruption he brings liberation, redemption to us all. For the coming of the Word of God is the divine interruption of, and ending of, the reign of sin, disease and death.

Prayer

Lord, who accepted the interruptions of our needs, our ailments and our sins,
and gave to us grace and love:
help us to accept the interruptions in our lives;
help us to get through the interruption of the pandemic;
help us to respond as you did when others interrupt us.
Give us the patience to wait things out, confidently trusting in you,
knowing that in giving and receiving we share in your divine life.
Break into and interrupt our depressions and resentments caused by the pandemic.
Reveal yourself, O healer, and raise us up.

Saint Irenaeus and the three pillars of faith

Irenaeus (AD 120-200) came from a Greek Christian family in Smyrna in Asia Minor and he heard the preaching of Polycarp, the Bishop there who was the last known living connection with the apostles. Irenaeus went to Rome and studied under Justin Martyr, was active as an ecclesiastical mediator in Asia-Minor, dealing with conflicts between churches on such matters as the date to celebrate Easter (on the same date as the Jewish Passover or always on a Sunday) and as an opponent of the false teachings of gnostic heretics. He also worked as a missionary in Southern Gaul (Southern France). During the persecutions there in Lyon, he was sent to report on them to the Church in Rome. On his return he became the successor Bishop to the martyred Pothinus. Irenaeus is supposed to have later been martyred though not much is known about this.

What Irenaeus is best known for is his writings on gnosticism, the heresy, or rather a whole suite of heresies, that afflicted the growing church of this time.

'Gnosis' is the Greek word for 'knowledge' and the gnostics were sects that made salvation dependent on secret knowledge, on intellectual enlightenment rather than faith, love and moral activity in the world. Their lack of interest in right action in the world or for justice in society was linked to their dislike of the existing universe. It was precisely their denial of the worth of the material world that led to them denying that how one behaved in the world was worth anything. This led to often totally contradictory behaviour. For example, with regard to sexual activity, one option, because the world was inferior or evil, was to abstain entirely and not to have children. The other opposite choice was to be totally libertine as nothing one did in the material world counted. Given their disdain for the material universe it logically followed that the Creation of the world was a mistake and that the God of the Old Testament was not the true God at all, but a kind of superior fallen angel artisan (the 'demiurge'). People, who had sparks of the real divinity trapped in their bodies made of the dirty matter of the universe had to be awakened. Initiated into secret knowledge of their true status, they could then be let loose from the material universe entirely. Over time the gnostics copied the Christian's gospels and (and some of Paul's letters) rewriting them to conform to their idea of Jesus as an otherworldly figure who came to help people escape from the material world. The best known of these gnostic gospels is one called the *Gospel of Thomas*. Ironically, it was these spurious Gnostic writings that prompted the Church to decide what writings were authentic – and that is how we got our New Testament.

Irenaeus made a thorough study of the gnostics and his books provide incredibly detailed and accurate accounts of their beliefs. To counter their false teachings of supposed secret wisdom, Irenaeus presented the three pillars of the faith of the Church: the scriptures, the traditions handed down by the apostles, and the teachings of the apostles' chosen successors. Anglicans may be interested to know that the so-called Lambeth quadrilateral reiterates these propositions:

- The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as "containing all things necessary to salvation," and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.

- The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
- The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself – Baptism and the Supper of the Lord – ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
- The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.

Irenaeus' powerful critique of gnosticism with its aristocratic knowledge for an elite is based upon his faith in the unity and goodness of God, that the incarnation of God in the created material world is what restores humanity, and that faith and loving ethical action in the world is necessary. He was excited by the beauty of God, truth and right action in the created world and in the hope of salvation for all.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ... did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”

Prayer (Irenaeus)

It is not you that shapes God
 it is God that shapes you.
 If you are the work of God
 await the hand of the artist
 who does all things in due season.
 Offer Him your heart,
 soft and tractable,
 and keep the form
 in which the artist has fashioned you.
 Let your clay be moist,
 lest you grow hard
 and lose the imprint of his fingers.

Collect

Almighty God,
 who upheld your servant Irenaeus with strength to maintain the truth against
 every blast of vain doctrine:
 Keep us, we pray, steadfast in your true religion,
 that in constancy and peace we may walk in the way that leads to eternal life;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord,
 who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
 one God, for ever and ever.

Second shots

Today I finally got my SMS message to say that I was to go and have my second shot of the Pfizer vaccine on Friday.

Today I also read an article by Zackie Achmat of Treatment Action Campaign fame who argued very forcefully that anti-Covid-19 vaccination should be compulsory. One's initial reaction might be to ask why this would be necessary as nobody in their right mind would not get vaccinated. Unfortunately we no longer live in a world in which facts are obvious and common sense followed. Social media spread false information with extreme rapidity. One study found that Facebook posts refer to untrustworthy news sources over 15% of the time but to authoritative news sites only 6% of the time. Another study which examined a huge sample of Twitter stories found that false news stories were 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than true stories were. At a more personal level I have been dismayed to hear friends and acquaintances spouting patently false information they have read off the social media.

The factual and common sense arguments for 100% vaccination are clear. The pandemic will only cease when the virus cannot infect any new victims – that means, everybody will be immune, either because they have been vaccinated or they have already had Covid-19 (and the new variants of the virus may mean that such immunity may be only temporary). Because many people show no symptoms of infection and are apparently fit and well, does not mean that they are not spreading the virus.

It is here that the bad-faith of the anti-vaccination people is most obvious, presenting arguments such as “It's my body! I can do what I want with it” and that there may be some occasional bad side effects.

Our bodies are only in a limited sense totally ours. Our bodily being exists within an incredibly complex matrix of community interactions. Where do we think our food comes from that keeps our bodies alive, our medicines, and so on? We have rules in society to keep us all alive. Perhaps a most obvious one is traffic laws. No doubt it would be nice not to have to stop at traffic lights but we obey because the alternative is traffic chaos and mass fatalities in accidents. You may decide you don't want to or need to be vaccinated but your selfish, individualistic behaviour may lead to you, unknowingly infecting others. No Christian can adopt such selfish behaviour.

The argument about side effects is driven by ignorance and an inability to understand big numbers (South Africa pays a high price for its poor education delivery). All vaccines, as with all medicines, have side effects. This is why there are regulations for the approval of medicines and vaccines. That is why you have those leaflets inside the boxes of the medicines you use that list doses and warning of any side-effects. The Covid-19 vaccines have been rigorously trialled and some negative side effects have been reported. But the crucial thing to note here is that the percentage of people who might experience such effects is minuscule compared to the huge population of the infected who experience the “full-effects” of getting Covid-19.

So I would agree with Zackie Achmat. I think vaccination should be compulsory (except in cases of medical exemption). I agree that people in public service should not be permitted to work unless they are vaccinated. It is time to stop pussy-footing around in a time of world and national emergency.

I am going for my second shot and I have no doubt in a year's time we will all have to go through the vaccination process again. So be it.

But what about the second shot the country needs to rearm ourselves against the deadly assault on humanity? Without disrespect, it is pointless if ministers sermonize their congregation (well, online for the next two weeks) about Jesus the healer and Jesus the truth if they do not educate the people of the Church on health matters and the imperative to fully and completely join in the struggle to only communicate the truth. The church should be at the forefront of getting people to the vaccination stations. This is a war and the Church should be on its front-lines.

Prayer (Ignatius Loyala)

Lord, teach me to be generous.
Teach me to serve you as you deserve;
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to ask for reward,
save that of knowing that I do your will. Amen.

O Christ Jesus,
when all is darkness
and we feel our weakness and helplessness,
give us the sense of Your presence,
Your love, and Your strength.
Help us to have perfect trust
in Your protecting love
and strengthening power,
so that nothing may frighten or worry us,
for, living close to You,
we shall see Your hand,
Your purpose, Your will through all things.
Amen.

Ever-defeated, never subdued

The writer of the great high fantasy epic, the *Lord of the Rings*, once wrote to his son saying “you and I both belong to the ever-defeated, never altogether subdued side.” It is a sentiment many of us can feel, depressed as we are by the multitude of defeats we see in our world but kept going by the ultimate hope that is central to faith.

Although there is a sense in which things have got better over the centuries, it is hard to forget that the last century was the bloodiest in world history or that the supposed triumph of civilization over nature now seems ephemeral with the Covid-19 pandemic and the looming catastrophe of climate warming. The defeats keep coming.

I think that we in the South African churches somewhat lost the plot after the termination of the dragon of apartheid in the 1990s. Separation and discrimination had been overcome. What was there left to do, other than at an individual level of piety? . How wrong we were! Another dragon was just around the corner. Could we have imagined in mid-1994 that our country would be ‘eaten’ by the corrupt. And very little was done to stop it by Christians. We did not see the defeat that was coming upon us.

Today I listened to an analysis of the distribution of the vaccines in the world. While most rich countries in the north have ample supplies – in many cases hundreds of percentages more than they will ever need – Africa is heading towards a ‘third-wave’ nightmare because it simply cannot get access to the quantity of vaccines needed or the logistical capacity to distribute them. We are heading towards another defeat.

Going back to the author of *Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien, a devout Christian, tried in his stories to give examples of the right response to the reality of such defeats. He undoubtedly saw the Christian story as an “eucatastrophe” – a catastrophe that ends in joy. But the joy only comes in the context of catastrophe. The story of Jesus of Nazareth is a disaster that ends on a desolate execution site near Jerusalem, but, beyond the end, comes the resurrection and vindication. But it is also the story of a man who does not yield, does not give up, even if victory comes only on the other side of death. Tolkien was also influenced by his understanding of the Scandinavian stories and poets that he loved, with their descriptions of ancient heroes who sided with their gods against the forces of chaos and unreason because it was the right side, even though they do not win.

In these times of difficulty, of depression and waiting, it is good to remember that encountering defeats is part of our life in this creation, that there will always be a new dragon winging its way towards us, but that despite the defeats we can remain unsubdued. For that is the promise of faith that we will not be subdued.

For we are aligned to the true unsubdued one, the real dragon-slayer.

Prayer

Creator, be with us in this time of difficulty,
when much seems to go wrong,
when we see defeat after defeat around us.
Sustain us with your strength,
infuse in us the courage of your Son Jesus,
open our eyes to the hope that is in you.
Drive from us nostalgia and regrets,
phantasies of being born in better times,
Help us to side with the righteous,
to live unsubdued in the time that is given us.
Amen.

Fantasies

I love fantasy literature – novels that stretch your sense of the possible, your ability to wonder, whether it be in a science fiction story set in an alien world or of some hero or heroine in a conflict on earth with exotic beings. To my mind the best do what G.K. Chesterton said fairy tales do;

“The old fairy tale makes the hero a normal human boy; it is his adventures that are startling; they startle him because he is normal. But in the modern psychological novel the hero is abnormal; the centre is not central. ... The fairy tale discusses what a sane man will do in a mad world. The sober realistic novel of today discusses what an essential lunatic will do in a dull world.”

So fantasy does help us to be startled by possibilities, to explore the nearly inconceivable, but remain ourselves.

But fantasy, or perhaps I will use the spelling ‘phantasy’ to distinguish it from my leisure reading, can be a mixed blessing. Our human ability to phantasize is akin to that other extraordinary human ability – to lie. Both enable us to create alternative realities, at least in our words, pseudo-realities that do not correspond to the actual factual world. For the religious person lies are particularly bad because they are a denial of the creation, that everyday reality in which we live. They are a counter ‘creation’ of a false realm which the liar finds more congenial. Phantasizing is more ambiguous. It can be glorious or near demonic in its effects.

We all phantasize to some degree, imagining how things are going to turn out, how we are going to get out of the fixes we are in, how we are going to be in the future. We are particularly prone to phantasizing when we desperately desire something or to do something and our phantasies about it provide us with all the rationalisations, and arguments and best possible outcomes that we can imagine. This is not necessarily always a bad thing. Many of the great changes in society happened because of some people’s phantasies about, say ending slavery, or getting rights for workers, or ending racial discrimination. One thinks of Martin Luther King and his “I have a dream.”

But phantasies can also be destructive when our selfish, egotistical mind becomes intoxicated and overwhelmed by its inner vision, feels empowered by it, and is carried away by it, literally possessed by it. This is not necessarily only individual, whole societies or sections of them can be possessed. One thinks of the collective phantasy of total racial segregation in apartheid South Africa. We have seen an up to the minute collective phantasy in the minds of Trump supporters in the United States of America who imagined a Make America Great Again crusade that would push away their dark – their fellow democratic citizens, blacks, Mexicans, the rest of the world.

Saint Augustine, who prior to his conversion, had a sometime chequered life, had wonderfully wise words to say about phantasy. He was writing to gnostics who had an out of control, if not perverse, phantasy life:

“Let those be angry with you who do not know with how great toil truth is attained, or how difficult it is to avoid mistakes. Let those be angry with you who do not know how rare a thing it is, and how hard a thing, to be free from the phantasies which arise within us. Let those be angry with you who know not how painful is the healing of the inner eye of man if it is to behold its true Sun not that image of the Sun in the sky which you know, but that Sun of which it is written, "The Sun of Righteousness is risen upon me", and of which the Gospel says, "This was the true Light that enlightens every person that comes into this world". ... Let those be angry with you who do not know what sighs and tears are needed if the real God is to be known even in the tiniest degree. Lastly, let those be angry with you who have never been led astray, as you, and I, have been led astray. But for me to be angry with you, is utterly impossible.”

Prayer

Creator of the universe we live in,
glorious in its wonders and terrors:
help us to bravely go out into both that visible world,
and the depths of our own minds, conscious and hidden;
Grant us the gifts to dream and envision and imagine,
but preserve us from the bent phantasies that also arise within us,
distracting and poisoning our souls;
Through the strength of your Son, our Lord,
who has descended to all depths,
liberator of all.

Amen

The authority to forgive

Matthew 9:1-8

And after getting into a boat Jesus crossed the water and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralysed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.' Then some of the scribes said to themselves, 'This man is blaspheming.' But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – then said to the paralytic – 'Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.' And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

The lectionary reading for today struck me as both a straightforward story and yet also deeply complex.

We are all so familiar with the idea that Jesus went around forgiving people and irritating the Pharisees by doing so. We are now so used to the idea that Christians are meant to forgive people that forgiveness can become quite formulaic. So we do not feel the shock, the novelty, the revolution that is portrayed in this passage.

One of the Old Testament's words sometimes used for forgiveness (*nasa'*) also means lift up or bear up so there is something of a pun in Jesus telling the man to pick up his bed and carry it home. People have to carry their sins (Leviticus 5:1, 17,; 19:8) and yet now, through this act of forgiveness, this man can now carry his bed, proof of his healing, proof that the paralysing weight of his sins is overcome. Jesus is not making some sort of judicial pronouncement, putting into place a merely legal sort of transaction – "I forgive you: you are acquitted, you are not guilty." Jesus is saying that somehow that burden will be carried.

The Old Testament was not hot on forgiveness, only God could forgive sins and people had to make sacrificial transactions for the unwitting sins they committed. So it is not without reason that the scribes in this tale consider that Jesus forgiving sins is blasphemous. And Jesus' intentions are clearly seen by the crowds. They understand what is going on. Jesus is saying that human beings (*anthropos*) now have the power to forgive.

Consider that message. God is giving, delegating, his divine authority to forgive – to us. And that changes everything. But that change, that can rework history and undo the deadly causal chain of sin and its consequences, comes at a cost. Again we are all familiar with the idea that Jesus, on the cross, forgives all. But forgiving means a cost to human beings too. Saying the words is not enough. Can we carry, help bear the burden of, the person or group of people we have forgiven? Can we help carry the load, can we ensure that the forgiven are indeed lifted up, carried forward?

Prayer

O Christ, Redeemer and forgiver,
You who represent all humanity as you forgive,
forgive the sins of all who are inextricably joined to me –
relatives, friends, neighbours, enemies, far off people.
Help us to forgive too, sharing in your divine authority,
and enable us carry each others burdens, one for another.
May we live in the changed world that forgiveness creates,
one in your love and glory.
Amen

Death and grief in the time of Covid-19

Over 600 000 people die a year in South Africa, so roughly one out of every hundred people alive now will die this year. Most of us know at very least about 150 people – those with whom we are in some sort of stable social relationship of friendship or acquaintance based on direct personal knowledge. So somebody you know will be among the deaths this year. If you are an older person, with older friends, naturally this number will be larger. And now there are the additional pandemic deaths.

We have all experienced that sense of loss at the death of people we know, obviously more so with the death of a relative or very close friend. Over the ages, religion has always been concerned with how the living deal with death and the anguish that accompanies bereavement. Now in the time of the pandemic we are in a strange situation. The number of people we know who die this year will increase, and particularly among people whom we did not expect to die. The normal rituals that used to help us assuage the grief are truncated, if not almost totally absent, because of the lockdown regulations. Grief will be more prolonged. Needless to say, the ability to comfort the dying has also been eroded, with people dying alone without family or ministers. It is a truly difficult time, a time in which people must be allowed to give voice to the anguish, loneliness and confusion that accompanies death.

It is a tragedy that at a time of a death we are not able to have person-to-person contact and very limited, at a distance, visitation.

Many people have relied on cellphones and internet connectivity to try and get around the barrier of necessary social distancing at the time when we really need to be close. It is not easy though, as many, particularly older people, are not comfortable with electronic social media or simply cannot afford the air-time costs. These are real problems if online services, including memorial services, are the only ones that are possible.

Phoning people on a regular basis is, at the very least, one way of trying to remain in human contact. A kind of 'drive-by' visitation is another. My local church has already tried giving communion to and anointing parishioners who drive up to the church and remain seated in their cars.

Expecting priests and deacons to easily find replacement activities to home visiting, bedside prayers and large and prolonged funerals and memorial services is unrealistic. Only a more fully mobilized church, a whole congregation, can do it – through prayer, better communication, encouraging phone calls and notes, and other acts of service. And members of the online community need to engage responsively to online services in post-service online conversations because for people who engage regularly in Facebook or WhatsApp or Signal activity, the one-way communication of online services may seem curiously deficient.

In this time we do what St Paul commanded, "mourn with those that mourn" (Romans 12:15).

Prayer (Catholic and Jewish prayers)

Source of all life and healing,
Be with me in this time of physical, emotional and spiritual need.
Help me cope with the challenges I am facing.
Comfort and encourage those who love and care
and whose lives have been unsettled and disrupted by illness.
I pray for patience and for understanding.
I pray for strength and wisdom.
I pray for healing and for inner peace.

O Shepherd of Israel,
Who dost neither slumber nor sleep,
we are the people of Thy pasture and the sheep of Thy hand.
Enfold us safely in Thy love.
And if in our grief and loneliness and moments of desolation,
we should stray from following Thee,
O leave us not, faithful Shepherd,
but draw us near unto Thee.

Christ the Tiger

Many years ago, as a student in Pietermaritzburg, I studied English literature at university and one of the poets I studied was T.S. Eliot, considered one of the great poets of the last century. As with all great poets he had a facility for looking at the world, looking at commonplace objects and events, and enabling us to see them in a new way – evoking a sense of wonder.

Today a verse from his poem *Gerontion* has been ringing in my head:

Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year
Came Christ the tiger.

Now Christ's ministry was full of meaningful signs, look at the healings. But his opponents kept asking for wonders instead of grasping his message. This attitude is well expressed in another bit of poetry, bad poetry this time, from the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* which has King Herod expressing precisely this kind of misunderstanding:

Jesus, I am overjoyed to meet you face to face.
You've been getting quite a name all around the place.
Healing cripples, raising from the dead.
...
So, you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ.
Prove to me that you're divine; change my water into wine.
That's all you need do, then I'll know it's all true.
...
Prove to me that you're no fool; walk across my swimming pool.
If you do that for me, then I'll let you go free.
Come on, King of the Jews.

Herod, along with much of the world wants magical miracles, not the love and grace of God. They simply cannot see the glory of God in the words and work of the carpenter from Nazareth.

Sometimes we ourselves, as Christians, rather concentrate too much on the humble rabbi walking on the shore of the Lake of Galilee. And sometimes our lamb of God imagery lets us down here – we think of cuddly, innocent lambs out in the fields. Easy enough to slaughter a meek and mild preacher, as easy as slaughtering a lamb.

So, though it is biblical custom to imagine Christ as the Lamb of God (John 1:29) sacrificed on the altar of the Cross, we also have to remember that Jesus is also the Lion of Judah. Death was beaten by the Lion of Judah, for the risen, conquering one is both lamb and lion. As a vision in Revelation 5:5-6 puts it:

Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.' Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.

The writer of Revelation shows us that Christ is both the lamb and the lion at once, always and forever both.

When the scribes and Pharisees called for wondrous signs – Matthew 12:38: “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” – they were blind to what was in front of them. Expecting a Messianic lion they saw a lamb. They simply could not see that Jesus was both.

T.S. Eliot startles us into this re-recognition of Christ as Tiger. In another line he says:

The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours

Unless we appreciate the beauty of the Tiger, the quiet beauty visible when he stalked the earth as the Nazarene, unless we accept the wonder of the Lamb that is Tiger, we are left only with our spurious desires for magical wonders and the terror of God's judgement in a new coming.

When we happily say: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20) remember the Tiger.

Prayer

Lion of Judah
May we glory in your power and beauty,
your descent into the death and the dark for us.
We stand in awe of your victory over sin and death,
your breaking of the walls of imprisonment.

Lion of Judah, arise and save us.
Lion of Judah, arise and fight for us.
Lion of Judah, devour all that is evil.

We rejoice in your strong protection,
We rejoice that you are both Lamb and Lion.
Allelujah, the Lion of God is Lord.

It goes on

Today is the hundredth day of the second year of lockdown. The pandemic continues and Africa reels under the third wave. Television viewers are treated to exemplary portrayals of a general disrespect for law, disrespect for others, and a disrespect for one's own health, outside an ex-president's mansion in Nkandla. Journalists are assaulted there as they are assaulted and tortured in the retro-feudal kingdom of eSwatini (about which democratic South Africa has done nothing for nearly three decades). Misinformation about Covid-19 and vaccination pollutes the social media and person-to-person gossip with a seemingly unstoppable force.

It is at time like this that one gets weary. Will it ever end? Can one endure, continue being hopeful?

One of the virtues of the Old Testament is that some of its writers knew all about this feeling of near despair at the continuation of seemingly never-ending disaster, misfortune and the buffeting from evil powers. There was wisdom in accepting into holy scripture the complaints, the sense of unfairness of life, and even the anger against what appeared to be failures in divine providence. We find these expressions of human angst particularly in the Psalms, and the wisdom writings such as Ecclesiastes and Job. But the prophets too were not immune to such complaining. Who can forget the despairing words of Jeremiah after he had been beaten and put in the stocks (Jeremiah 20: 7-10):

You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed.
I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.

Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction.
So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long.

But if I say, "I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,"
his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones.
I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

And it gets worse in Jeremiah in verses 14 to 18 in which he curses the day he was born and his parents for not aborting him!

We can take a curious comfort from these holy words of scripture. It is OK to feel like this. This is how human beings often do feel. We are not going to be condemned for complaining occasionally and finding the task of enduring all too much. One cannot rationalise away or suppress these kinds of thoughts. They do come to us. And in the same way that we have to endure and keep struggling against all the bad things around us, and often have to live with them for all too long a time, so too do we have to endure our own inability to get over the unfairness of life.

One cannot reason a way out of these thoughts and feelings. Some Christians try to do so, putting on an always smiling face, I fear at great cost to themselves. There is no escape from life at times being very, very tough.

The answer is not in some intellectual formula, some pat answer. The answer, which is not an answer to a question, but a statement of a reality, also lies in the words of Jeremiah. He can bitterly complain against what God has done to him by calling him to be a prophet, but all the same:

his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones

It is that fire, that reality, which we can experience in our innermost being – in our heart, shut up in our very bones – that enables us to endure, to keep going, to keep the faith.

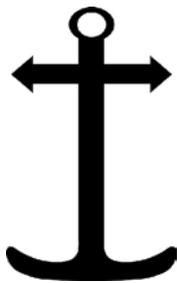
Prayer

Lord, who created this world in which we live,
Enable us to endure the difficulties and trials we face.
Be with us when we despair at the chaos and unreason around us,
when futures seem bleak and inhospitable,
when we are overwhelmed by sorrow for ourselves and others.
Be with us.
Give us the fire and warmth of your love,
in our very being, more inward than our heart and bones.
Help us to hear your words to Jeremiah at his call:
“And I for my part have made you today a fortified city,
an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land –
against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests,
and the people of the land. They will fight against you;
but they shall not prevail against you,
for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you.”
And enable us to say, “Amen”.

X

In our Sunday online service this week one of our presenters made an engaging use of a storyboard in which she outlined the several meanings of the writing symbol X – it stands as a sign in a marked school book that the answer is **wrong**, for **love** or a kiss, for a **choice** on an electoral ballot, a place on map showing where **treasure** is hidden, and of course for the **cross** of Christ. And so our wrongness and sinfulness are corrected by God's love shown on the cross and we are urged to choose the divine treasure offered to us.

The cross symbol is indeed an interesting one. It was not one that was particularly prominent in the early days of the Church, partly because in the Roman world crosses were readily visible as the horrible instruments of public executions by torture until the first Christian emperor banned crucifixion. Ironically enough, the first artistic portrayal in about AD 220 of the Christian cross, is an anti-Christian piece of graffiti showing a body with a donkey's head on a cross and the words "Alexander worships his god". So the mocker at least knew that Christians worshipped a crucified god and it was soon the case that Christians were accused of being worshippers of the cross. We know that already by about AD 200 Christian used to make the sign of the cross.



Sometimes a T was used as a shorthand for "cross" in some New Testament manuscripts or the cross was hidden in, or merged with other symbols, such as the Anchor or the capital Greek letters X and P for Ch and R the first letters in ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (Christos).



When crosses began to be depicted, they usually showed Christ risen in glory, Christ reigning from the cross. Crucifixes in the modern sense only appeared in the 6th century AD. What the early Christians would have made of the modern practice of wearing a cross as a piece of decorative jewellery is hard to imagine.

The New Testament contains a number of quite symbolic references to Jesus being 'raised' on the cross. John 3:14-15 says:

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

There is irony in that the being lifted up on the cross, by his enemies, by the world alienated from God, enables him to lift all, drag all humanity with him into redemption, well expressed in the words of the Third Eucharistic prayer:

For our sake he opened his arms on the cross.

I will end with a passage I love from G.K Chesterton about the cross as a Christian symbol:

“Take the cross as the symbol at once of mystery and of health. ... Christianity is centrifugal: it breaks out. For the circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is fixed for ever in its size; it can never be larger or smaller. But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its centre it can grow without changing. The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travellers.”

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, may we open our arms to you;
And in doing so, open our arms to others.
Enable us to sign your holy cross on our bodies,
our hearts, our minds.
May we in your cross find our health.
May we in your cross find our vision,
expanding out, without limits, without constraints.
May you, who broke sin and death though nailed down,
liberate us into your new life and its joy.
Amen

The A to Z

Much of the pandemic news for the last couple of weeks has made reference to the dreaded new variant of the Covid-19 virus, Variant D, or Delta which is much more infectious. Originally the variants were named after the country where they were first discovered, but the countries concerned were not happy with that, so now the Greek alphabet is used. So far we've got Alpha (United Kingdom), Beta (South Africa), Gamma (Brazil) and then Delta (India). What I discovered today is that a whole lot more variants have been identified and we are well down the Greek alphabet with Epsilon, Zeta, Eta, Theta, Iota, Kappa and Lambda, indeed nearly halfway to the last letter, Omega.

I have no doubt at all that we will get to Omega and that it is likely that for the rest of my life I will have to get my annual, new variant, Covid vaccine booster shot. The disease will never be eliminated, as smallpox was and polio nearly has been, because there are significant proportions of people in most countries who are already infected with misinformation, conspiracy theories and selfishness. What a world!

The Christian faith has had a long interest in the alphabet, how could it not be when the Word of God is so central, when the people of the faiths descended from Abraham are described as "the people of the book", and when the Lord of all is described as the "Alpha and the Omega" (that is, "the A to Z" in the Roman alphabet).

It had long been agreed in Jewish thought that God was the beginning and the end, as in Isaiah 44:6:

"Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, besides me there is no god'.

But it is in Revelation that the image of the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet are used as the self-designation of the God revealed in Jesus:

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. ... 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.' (Revelation 1:8, 17).

'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.' (Revelation 21:6)

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.' (Revelation 22:13)

As we live through the sad Covid-19 variant alphabet it is good to remember the promise in that Alpha and Omega title. The divine love was before all and will be after the end of all. God was in the beginning of the creation of the universe, through its working and will be in its end. God is greater than all the variants of disease and the

variables of our historical and earthly lives. “Do not be afraid” God says, “I am the first and last, and the living one.”

Prayer

Lord God, creator and redeemer,
Be with us as we struggle each step of the way,
buffeted by the variety of evils we encounter.
Still our fears and anxieties as we imagine the worst,
calm our distress in thinking about ourselves and others.
For you are in our beginning,
you are the origin of our life,
you descended from the heights to the depths
to rescue us, to open the gates of death and Hades,
you love us from A to Z.
We ask this in the name of your Word, Jesus,
the first and the last, the living one.
Amen

Greek Alphabet and Symbols

Α α Alpha	Β β Beta	Γ γ Gamma	Δ δ Delta	Ε ε Epsilon	Ζ ζ Zeta
Η η Eta	Θ θ Theta	Ι ι Iota	Κ κ Kappa	Λ λ Lambda	Μ μ Mu
Ν ν Nu	Ξ ξ Xi	Ο ο Omicron	Π π Pi	Ρ ρ Rho	Σ σ, ς Sigma
Τ τ Tau	Υ υ Upsilon	Φ φ Phi	Χ χ Chi	Ψ ψ Psi	Ω ω Omega

Four million

On Wednesday the official death toll from Covid-19 hit four million worldwide. That terrible figure of course pales into insignificance when compared to the Spanish flu of 1918 (over 20 million and possibly as high as 50 million) or the Black death of 1346 to 1353 (75 to 200 million). But still terrible. Terrible because each death represents pain and loss and grieving. Our current third wave is really starting to affect people because whereas with the earlier waves one might not personally know a person who had died, now nearly everybody does. The reality of the pandemic is sinking in, as is our awareness that we will never go back to what life was before.

It could have been worse without lockdown, some medical advances in treatment, and better hospital care, but we are not over the worst yet. The World Health Organization has warned that the premature dropping by some countries of containment measures will leave populations vulnerable to “a respiratory virus that is mutating rapidly and becoming increasingly effective at moving from human-to-human. Variants are currently winning the race against vaccines because of inequitable vaccine production and distribution, which also threatens the global economic recovery.” Indeed the head of the WHO condemned “vaccine nationalism, where a handful of nations have taken the lion’s share, is morally indefensible” with only about 1% of people in poor countries having received vaccination when to genuinely contain the virus about 70% of the adult population needs to be vaccinated. South Africa, nominally a middle-income country has only vaccinated 6%. “It didn’t have to be this way and it doesn’t have to be this way going forward.” he concluded.

So clearly there is work ahead of us as individuals (learning to live in this situation and caring for other individuals) and as citizens (to insist that the governments and institutions of society such as political parties and churches and business enterprises, do the right thing). No one is exempt from these duties – we are all in this together, whether we like it or not.

Prayer (Matthew Henry)

Lord, enable me when times are good to be happy,
but when times are bad to consider:
for you have made the one as well as the other. (Ecclesiastes 7:14)
Enable me to add to my knowledge self-control;
and to self-control, perseverance. (2 Peter 1:6)
Give me grace to remain with you
in the situation you called me to (1 Corinthians 7:24)
and in all my ways to acknowledge you (Proverbs 3:6)
and be pleased to direct my paths. (Proverbs 16:9)

A sublime hymn of praise

In the early part this week I worked on a sermon for our online Sunday service and worked with the text from Ephesians 1:3-14. The result is that I want to devote the next couple of homilies to looking at this text. Whilst I was doing so, I was intrigued as to why the compilers of the lectionary had put this passage together with the lurid description of John the Baptist's beheading. What on earth linked the two? There seemed to be no possible connection or parallel. I found an answer in the conclusion I came to that these compilers had a dry sense of word-play humour. The Gospel text talks of **beheading**. Ephesians talks, well the Greek text does, about Christ **re-heading** humanity. John the Baptist, as do we all, gets his head back!

Ephesians 1:3-14 is a sublimely beautiful hymn of praise to God for the blessings given by the Father to all through Christ. In the original Greek it is one long sentence, broken into three parts by a refrain "to the praise of his glory". Indeed I wonder if it does not reflect prayers said in those apostolic times in the Eucharist. Although attributed to Paul, and thus presumably written when he was under restriction in Rome, some believe it was written by a Pauline disciple a decade or two after Paul's death and summing up his message.

Here is the text (which I have adapted from various translations):

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,
 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world
 to be holy and blameless before him in love.
 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ,
 according to his will's delight,
for the praise of the glory of his grace with which he graced us in the Beloved.

In Christ we have the fee for liberation through his blood,
 the forgiveness of our trespasses,
 according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us in all wisdom and insight.
 He has made known to us the mystery of his will,
 according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ,
 as a plan for the fullness of time,
 to recapitulate all things in Christ,
 things in heaven and things on earth.
 In him we have also obtained an inheritance,
 having been destined according to the purpose of him
 who effects all things according to the counsel of his will,
 so that we, who first hoped in the Christ,
 might live *for the praise of his glory*.

You also are in him,
 having heard the word of truth, the good news of your salvation,
 and had faith in him,
 you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;
 this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people,
to the praise of his glory.

In our world there are many who make all sorts of promises about how humanity can be remade and society perfected, usually by economic, political or technological means. This Pauline hymn also sees a new humanity and new society – but sees it all accomplished by the work of Jesus. And in the love of the creator, before the foundation of the cosmos, we were chosen by God – before we have done anything or been anything.

Prayer (Paul)

Paul's prayers for us

I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you..." (Romans 1:8-10)

"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus..." (1 Corinthians 1:4)

"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers..." (Ephesians 1:16)

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy..." (Philippians 1:3-4)

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you..." (Colossians 1:3)

"We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers..." (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3a)

"We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right..." (2 Thessalonians 1:3)

"I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers..." (Philemon 1:4)

"May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him..." (Ephesians 1:17)

Three words

Continuing to look at Ephesians 1:3-14 and particularly at 1:10 in which, in a few key words, we are told what God gave us in Christ:

as a **plan** for the **fullness** of time, to **gather up all things** in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

I want to go through those words:

God had a **plan**. The Greek word is **oikonomia**. From which our English word economy comes. It is a plan that covers everything.

It will come in the **fullness** of time, when the time is fully right and complete. The Greek word is **pleroma**. It stands for a wonderful **fullness**, a totality.

In Christ all things will **be gathered up**, summed up. The Greek word is **anakephalaioo** which means getting a new head, a 'recapitulation'. It means being reorganized and summed up into a new whole. In Christ all will be restored and re-headed by him, for Christ will be the new head.

And the **plan**, the **fullness** and the **reheading** covers everything, all "**things in heaven and things on earth**" – literally everything. It is not just that somehow in heaven when we die that things will be sorted out. It covers earth and heaven. This is about the whole cosmos, the whole universe.

Looking again at that idea of fullness, the **pleroma**. That word "pleroma", fullness, came to have a more specific meaning in the new faith – of the fullness, the completeness, the totality of divine powers. In the New Testament that fullness, completeness, is seen in Jesus of Nazareth.

And what an astounding idea that is.

If we imagine, or rather try to imagine, the immense powers of the God who can create this gigantic, magnificent universe, loving it into being, can that mental picture be applied to a lowly carpenter from Nazareth? The apostles and Paul did so.

They saw that divine fullness in Christ. This fullness, this **pleroma**, emphasizes the completeness with which Jesus represents the Father; it is the fullness of life which makes him the true representative of God, without other intermediary agencies, and Lord of the whole universe. That pleroma/fullness was in him in the incarnation, in his being born as a wordless baby, in him dying on the cross out of love for all, in him in his glorious resurrection body.

It is a revolution in faith and thought. And it also makes us look again at what are truly the divine powers – and the New Testament came to the conclusion that the greatest of these was love.

What is wonderful is that the faithful are also to be incorporated into that same fullness, the complete perfection, “to the full measure of the pleroma of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13) “filled with all the pleroma of God” (Ephesians 3:19).

Yes, you can prayerfully affirm that: “I am in the pleroma!”

Prayer (Paul)

Paul prays for us

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory,
he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being
with power through his Spirit,
and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,
as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend,
with all the saints,
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Being re-headed

Continuing to look at Ephesians 1:3-14 and particularly 1:10:

as a **plan** for the **fullness** of time, to **gather up all things** in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

In Christ all things will **be gathered up**, summed up. The Greek word is **anakephalaioo** which means getting a new head, a 'recapitulation'. It means being reorganized and summed up into a new whole. In Christ all will be restored and re-headed by him, for Christ will be the new head.

This **fullness**, this **headship** of Christ over all – **and over the church** – is wonderfully expressed in Colossians 1:16-20

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him **all things hold together**. And he is the **head of the body, the church**. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the **fullness of God** was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And also in Ephesians 1:22-23:

And God has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Is that not a spectacular promise – that the fullness of Christ, his full embodiment of God's powers, God supplies to the Church. Christians are being filled by Christ (Ephesians 3:19, 4:13, 5:18, Colossians 1:9, 2:10, 4:12, John 1:16, 3:34)? The Church, Christ's body, guided by its head, completes his work on earth.

Looking at that **re-heading** idea again:

In Christ all will be restored, re-headed by him. Nothing good will be lost.

The Greek word **anakephalaioo** means "bringing again under one head". That is how the word is used in Ephesians 1:10:

"to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head".

The English word "recapitulate" used to translate "anakephalioo" literally means "providing a new head" and in common usage means to "to sum up" or "go over again". It is the longer word from which we derive the shorter and more popular word "recap" – the end of a speech concluding and summing up the main points.

When we apply this word to Jesus we are saying that Jesus, the Logos, the Word of God is the Father's "summary statement". Jesus is the full expression of the purpose, the logos of God, in and through which, the whole divine economy is planned and implemented. He is the speech of the Father that redeems and liberates and makes whole again.

The work of Christ undoes all the harm done by sin in the past (and present and future) in the Adam, as Paul puts it. In Christ, the human race is recapitulated, that is, given a New Head – the Christ becomes the new head of the human race and, as the second Adam, Christ succeeds where humanity failed. What was lost, the image and likeness of God is recovered, restored.

That **Christ is the head of the new humanity and the Church** show us that while we as individuals are important to God, we are also important to God as a human race. We are reminded that we are not merely saved as individuals, but we are part of God's plan to create a new human race in Christ. Christ's triumph is for the purpose of filling his realm with a new humanity. You can thus see the importance of church, that is us, as a corporate expression of this new reality.

That Christ is head of all things **affirms creation** and the goodness of the created order. Christ was born by his own created order of which he himself is the foundation. We are part of God's own creation and saving the world's environment is one of our tasks. Christ redeems not only people but an entire cosmos. When we partake of the Eucharist, sharing in the communion of his body and blood, we are affirming that earthly things – bread and wine – are also redeemed. We affirm the creation.

Looking back at those three Greek words in Ephesians 1:10: oikonomia, pleroma, and anakephalaioo – plan, fullness, re-head – we can see what a majestic and powerful and wonderful gospel message they send to us. As we struggle on with the pandemic and the world's ills, know that we are part of God's plan, share in the fullness of God's being in Christ, and go into the battle to love under a glorious new head.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Prayer

Lord of all, Father of all,
We give thanks for the astounding blessings from you,
that we are incorporated in you through Christ.
Help us to love you more fully and dearly:
that through the guidance of your holy Word
we may love our fellow human beings
and the creation in which we live
to your glory.
Amen.

Looting

South Africa has been systematically looted during the last fifteen years by connected and the powerful people. Now some of the less connected are having their turn, as we see in the amazing scenes on our televisions and cellphones as mall after mall is stripped of its contents.

For what it is worth, my opinion is that the current 'unrest' will burn itself out in a few days, partly because the vulnerable shopping centres will already have been looted and the army will be on hand. Although the first attacks were undoubtedly instigated by agents of the state capture cabal, so-called Radical Economic Transformation, and ex-President Zuma supporters, this is no well organised insurrection. And even if it was, in its present form, would not have the slightest hope of succeeding.

What is now happening is that previously passive criminality has been unleashed. There is an interesting rule of thumb that states that in most societies about 5 % of the population is dishonest, crooked. The so-called protests provided the release mechanism for this orgy of mindless looting to begin.

What the looting does reveal is the perhaps inevitable consequences of four things:

- **hideous inequality** which has got worse not better and which is rubbed in everybody's face by the conspicuous over-consumption of the wealthy, the celebrities, advertisers and prosperity cults. Being poor does not turn you into a looter, but being envious of a wealthy class you do not respect can.
- the rapid **decline in people's ability to survive** because of the pandemic, the growing unemployment and the ending of the R350 Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant for unemployed people that ended on 30 April 2021. The sooner we can have a basic income grant for all the better.
- the **appalling quality of education** which leaves the majority of young people hardly able to read, open to manipulation by the purveyors of rumours and misinformation, and unable to access suitable training.
- the **erosion of bonds** of family, religion, community and the habits of conformity to law and morality – a process that has not been reversed since apartheid days and in which the behaviour of the corrupt has shown that no moral rules apply and you can get away with it. Few people now respect the state or society's institutions. This is true for all classes.

The impact of the above does not turn everybody into a potential looter. But it surely weakens the strength to resist temptation when it is so easy to "grab a ..." (as the advertisers say) and when a host of your next door neighbours are running towards the cornucopia of a breached mall.

God's instructions to us remain. He has a plan for us, for humanity and the fullness of his divine presence is with us. We know what to do. If we do it, those above four ailments will be ameliorated. We have, as has been made more and more clear during this pandemic, work to do.

And one of the most immediate tasks will be relief for the old and poor when there are no shops or supermarkets or food nearby in the immediate aftermath of the looting. A whole shopping centre with supermarket and pharmacy a mere 500 metres away from my parish church was looted and trashed. Church members will be called upon to assist.

Hard and scary times but we will get through this too.

Prayer (Traditional)

O God,
Who knows us to be set in the midst of such great perils,
that, by reason of the weakness of our nature, we cannot stand upright,
grant us such health of mind and body,
that those evils which we suffer for our sins
we may overcome through your assistance.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The day after

In ancient times it was traditional practice after a capture of an enemy city to allow the troops three days of looting and rapine and then things had to stop and the new rulers would impose their own governance on the subdued city. The point of this was simple – normal functioning had to be restored quickly so life could continue and the new resource become a genuine asset for the victors. No doubt the victorious troops suffered a period of post-looting depression.

The unfolding tragedy in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng has revealed in the harshest light the unpreparedness of the state and particularly the police and the indecisiveness in the top leadership of government. What is going to unfold now is a horrific hangover that is going to affect all of us. This is because things are not going to go back to normal quickly and there could be devastating food security and health security consequences.

The main highway from Durban to Johannesburg is the main artery for food and manufactured products and fuel. The rail system no longer provides this function as it was run-down by the state capture looters and the scrap metal criminals. Because we actually do live in a world economy, everything these days is delivered just-in-time and this depends on the heavy trucks moving twenty-four hours a day every day. They are no longer moving and so we may well be without food, medical and other goods very soon. At the local level, the supermarkets and pharmacies and malls where these goods were distributed, are gone. The well off, as long as they have petrol, will be able, for example in Durban, to go to La Lucia – while stocks last. But poorer people in townships will soon discover that no food is available. The small percentage of the local population who were looters will discover that the food they stole doesn't last long, the alcohol merely provided a headache, and that you cannot eat a television. And they will soon feel the enmity of the rest of the community as everybody now suffers, including many who will have lost the jobs they had in the destroyed facilities. All this in the midst of winter as the third wave worsens and the vaccinations stall because of the disruptions. In simple terms, the lot of the poor will have been decidedly worsened.

What is to be done once the panic over the present violence declines and we are in the gloom of the day after? Clearly we have to intelligently economize during the predictable shortages. But we also have to be ready to help the truly innocent victims – those who cannot travel to get food or medicines. We have to be alert to these needs and assist where we can.

In the longer term, how are the looters to be reintegrated into society? As I watched the thousands of people looting, mainly ordinary looking poor people (there were of course the better-off criminals in their bakkies carting of television sets, fridges and booze), one could have wept at the failure of the churches to have inculcated a mind that would never have been incited to this behaviour, however poor one was. But there was also a failure of the churches to fight for a better deal for poor and unemployed people, living in desperation and alienation.

Prayers

(Anonymous 20th century prayer dedicated to St Francis)

Lord make me an instrument of your peace

Where there is hatred,
Let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is error, truth;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled
As to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

(Reinholdt Neibuhr)

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His Will;
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him
Forever and ever in the next. Amen.

A time of panic, despair and hope

I am sure that many people have been doing what I have been doing the last three days – watching the unfolding tragedy on the television screen and having phone conversations with relatives and friends. These conversations have often been filled with the venting of emotions of fear and panic which have been exacerbated by the difficulty of making sense of what is happening. It is the unknown faceless danger that is always more worrying than the known, because a known danger generally obeys certain rules and we know how to respond.

I think that in looking with understanding at this terrible assault on the economic fabric of our country, we have to distinguish between two things, because this helps us make the danger knowable.

First, that this unrest was deliberately instigated by a group of people who want South Africa to remain a corrupt state which will continue to “feed” them. When the truth comes out, as assuredly it will, I think we will find that the instigators at the high level deliberately ran down police preparedness for what was to happen and hired batches of alienated youth to initiate the unrest and provided them with transport to do so. They had a political agenda, even if it was a deranged and evil one and doomed to failure – for the mass of the people of South Africa are not going to be suckered a second time. Second, the explosion of looting that was unleashed had no political agenda and was a reflex of desperately poor and unemployed people living alienated from the well functioning parts of society. Unfortunately, as the Zulu king said on Wednesday, this action was suicidal and it is the poor who will suffer the most serious consequences.

If we can comprehend what is happening we can, somewhat, though not entirely, reduce our fears and panic. We can get through this and at local levels community watch groups and ad hoc militia are defending suburbs and townships. The unrest has not spread to other than the two affected provinces.

Then there is the problem of despair. Despair particularly affects good people. They see what has happened and could happen and they mourn what has been lost and squandered. They are tired of this seemingly never-ending struggle to mend poverty and suffering. Faith tells them that God incarnate shared poverty, suffering, despair and death with human beings. But keeping faith when one is emotionally exhausted requires great courage. And that is where hope, the paradoxical hope when there seems to be no hope, is so important.

But there are signs of hope. As already mentioned, the current mayhem has not spread beyond KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. And ordinary people are beginning to resist the looters and inciters in both provinces. Three simple images from Durban – young people supported by the taxi associations cleaning up of trash left by looters in central Durban; community defence groups made up of all colours and creeds, up all night in the cold guarding the road intersections leading to their suburb and a still largely intact mall; the local mosque handing out free loaves of bread to all. We are all in this together. It is our world and we love it and its people and we will defend its future.

Prayer

Father of all, true lover of your creation,
maker of humanity to be in your image,
whose incarnate word shared our hopes and fears:
may the example of the courage of Jesus inspire us,
may his endurance of suffering and despair strengthen us,
may his hope in your vindication enliven us too;
that we may go forward in faith and hope
trusting that the love of the Holy Trinity
enfolds us at all times.

Amen

Being vigilant

We are now in the time of the vigilantes. Television and other reports are full of accounts of local communities or suburbs setting up groups to erect barricades and, armed with an array of weapons ranging from hockey sticks to assault rifles, defend the area from the looters and arsonists in the present unrest. I do not need a television view to see this. There is a vigilante group stationed at an intersection 150 metres from where I live and on Thursday afternoon, when I went to deliver food supplies to a family member, I had to drive through five manned roadblocks and one empty one. This is the real situation in Durban. Local communities have decided to defend themselves because they have no assurance that the police or the defence force have the capability to speedily come to the area's rescue if attacked. And they have all seen the images of mall after mall and warehouse after warehouse being ransacked with hardly a policeman in sight.

A vigilante is a person who tries in an unofficial way to prevent crime, or to catch and punish someone who has committed a crime, especially because they do not think that official organizations, such as the police, are controlling crime effectively. Vigilantes usually join together to form groups. The definition fits! The word comes from the Spanish meaning watchman or guard and the word originates in the Latin for "to keep awake".

There are of course, possible problems with vigilantes. They very naturally orientate to an 'us' versus 'the outsiders' mentality, which, with the still deep territorial differences in South African towns and cities, can easily turn racist. Not that I have seen any evidence of this – most vigilante groups in Durban's more middle-class suburbs seem to be comprised of all colours and creeds. They can often be very brutal against offenders. And, if they have to hang around long enough, they often start demanding protection money. This does raise the question of whether members of Christian congregations should not get involved, even if only in a supportive role, to help keep them on the straight and narrow during what one hopes is a briefly needed role.

The irony is that we currently need vigilantes because, as a nation we have not been vigilant. If we had been vigilant, alert, awake, we would never have descended to where we are. And the churches also were not vigilant enough. As it is put in 1 Peter 5:8 "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, prowls about, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering." Nearly everybody (except of course for the instigators of the disaster) is wailing about the catastrophic intelligence failure of the police, military and national intelligence services. But the Church intelligence service was equally at fault, from local to higher levels.

There is a wonderful instruction in the Anglican ordination rite (of 1986) for deacons where they are instructed: "You are to interpret to the Church the needs, the concerns and hopes of the world." The earlier (1662) wording is more down to earth: "to search out the sick, the poor, the impotent people of the Parish, to intimate their estates,

names, and places where they dwell, unto the Curate, that by his exhortation they may be relieved with the alms of the Parishioners, or others." In simple language the deacons (an order in the Church that has been sorely undervalued and under-used) are the intelligence agents of the local community and of the world and the information they gather is to be used to galvanize action. It is time for all of us to awake (Ephesians 5:14): "Sleeper awake!"

Prayer

God of all wisdom,
whose Son is the life that is the light of all people,
a light that shines in the darkness and is not overcome:
awaken us with that light
that we may see clearly what is happening in your world
and arise in the strength of your resurrection
to do your will on earth,
remaining vigilant at all times
and responding to the needs of your people;
through the power of your triune love.

Amen.

Cleaning up

Although we are by no means out of the woods yet, the fact that we see scenes of community members cleaning up the debris left by the looters in many, many communities, shows that a crucial corner has been turned. At my local level a few small shops are open – a pizzeria, a café and a fish and chip shop. A couple of kilometres away, at Florida Road, a street of restaurants, even the ice cream shop is open. But this was an area with a very well organised group of vigilantes. At one road barrier in Musgrave, at about 5 pm they were distributing free eggs. Our local mosque has been handing out bread and milk to queues of people. It is of course the food and medicine and social grant shortages that will severely affect townships and more remote areas.

We can give thanks also that the instigators who started the whole thing off have signally failed. They were unable to collapse the country so that the state capture gang could escape accountability and even return to power. They targeted provinces which both make a huge contribution to South Africa's productivity but even here the mass of the population did not get involved. In other provinces, except for a minor disturbance in the North West, nothing happened. Ironically enough, South Africa is probably more unified tonight than it has been for a long time. This is our state, our government (however critical we may be of it), our Constitution, our home.

At the beginning of the pandemic last year there was an unfortunately short period when many thought that everything was going to change. Countries were going to behave better and the front-line personnel – the nurses, the shelf-stackers, the rubbish removers and all – were going to be better rewarded for their work. Poverty was going to be tackled. Humanity would always be put before profit. These good intentions waned somewhat, led by the poor example of the United States of America and England last year. But we have been given a second chance. Things do have to change. With unemployment as high as it is, we have to institute some form of basic social grant for all. We have to work together, harder and more effectively. For unless the hideous social fractures in South Africa are bridged and removed, desperately poor, under-educated and alienated people may again be used as the cannon fodder of evildoers.

Our vigilance in ensuring that this never happens again must be matched by hard work to rebuild a better society.

Prayer (Mother Teresa's adaptation of an exhortation by Kent Keith)

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centred.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.

Be honest and sincere anyway.
What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.
Create anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.
Be happy anyway.
The good you do today, will often be forgotten.
Do good anyway.
Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.
Give your best anyway.
In the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.

Keep your eye on the prize

I remember in the dark days of the mid-1960s listening to a banned Pete Seeger recording of “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”, a folk song that became influential during the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and which was itself based upon an older spiritual “the Gospel Plough” and all of course based upon the words of Jesus (Luke 9:62): ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’ Its last three verses are:

Freedom's name is mighty sweet
And soon we're gonna meet
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

I got my hand on the gospel plough
Won't take nothing for my journey now
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

Hold on, hold on
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on

This has been a tumultuous week that we will never forget, in an awful two years that we will never forget, in the aftermath of a decade of state capture looting that we will never forget. It does need pointing out that the billions lost in this week of destruction are minor compared to the billions looted by the Guptas and the state capture traitors. But the destroyers have not won, though I am sure they will still harass the nation for some time.

What is to be done?

Jesus uses the image of ploughing. Once you start ploughing you have to keep alert, you cannot stop, pause or lose concentration. The furrow has to be straight. You cannot redirect your eyes or look back.

We are in a similar position. The whole disaster has, somewhat miraculously, generated an upsurge of unity in South Africa directed at cleaning up the mess – in the streets, in unprepared government and in arresting and dealing with the instigators, in protecting the people and their constitutional state, and in recognising and doing something about the inequality and poverty. We are challenged to plough forward.

So what we have to do is to hold on. We know what the secular prize is. It is a democratic country with a well run state guided by intelligent and competent government in which the human needs and aspirations of all come first. In a democracy we are the rulers, so it is our responsibility, as Christians and people of other faiths, as citizens, to plough straight (hold it straight) and plough on (endure).

May we all, in the succeeding days, weeks and years keep our eyes on the prize and our hands on the plough.

Prayer (John Masefield)

O Christ who holds the open gate
O Christ who drives the furrow straight,
O Christ, the plough, O Christ, the laughter
Of holy white birds flying after.
Lo, all my heart's field's red and torn,
And thou wilt bring the young green corn,
The young green corn divinely springing,
The young green corn for ever singing;
And when the field is fresh and fair
Thy blessed feet shall glitter there,
And we will walk the weeded field,
And tell the golden harvest's yield,
The corn that makes the holy bread
By which the soul of man is fed,
The holy bread, the food unpriced,
Thy everlasting mercy, Christ.

Mandela Day

Yesterday was Mandela Day. Mandela Day was officially declared by the United Nations in November 2009, with the first Mandela Day held on 18 July 2010. It showed the whole world's recognition of the remarkable dedication, endurance and leadership of the man in helping South Africa undo a past of discrimination and enter a unified and democratic future. A statement was issued on Mandela's behalf:

"We would be honoured if such a day can serve to bring together people around the world to fight poverty and promote peace, reconciliation and cultural diversity."

This whole week has inevitably reminded me of another dreadful period, at the end of March 1990, when much of the valley in which the city of Pietermaritzburg lies was the scene of ferocious and bloody attacks which led to 20 000 refugees streaming into Pietermaritzburg to escape this so-called Seven Days War. I had been monitoring and analysing the political and apartheid state-induced violence in the Natal Midlands for three years and was part of a Crisis Committee set up by the churches, NGOs, COSATU trade unions, and United Democratic Front affiliates that met in the Anglican Cathedral every morning. I was selected by this group, together with Peter Kerchhoff of the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness, to brief Mandela when he was rushed to the city.

It was a hectic experience driving in a convoy to the scenes of devastation and areas still under attack. I was in a car with Alec Erwin (Education Officer of COSATU) and Mo Sheik. In Ashdown, attackers on the hill above us fired down and we had to hurriedly move Mandela away from that scene, Mo Sheik protecting Mandela with his own body.

During a brief pause for lunch in Edendale I was asked to brief Mandela. He listened, asked a few questions, but didn't say much. Although we stopped at many places and he would briefly address the crowds, he made little comment about what he had seen and heard from the anguished communities. Later that day, he gave a press conference at the Cathedral. He spoke for about twenty five minutes and he brilliantly summarised, analysed and drew conclusions from everything he had experienced.



This was a person gifted with the leadership to lead us all into the new democracy.

So it is serendipitous that on Sunday 18th after a week of tribulation that has brought fear, anxiety and misery but also glimmerings of a new unity and hope, we celebrate Mandela Day. Mandela epitomised good leadership that addressed the real problems

directly. It is the kind of leadership that we need at all levels – national, provincial and local – today. And Mandela Day reminded us of that.

Now in 2021, the unrest that happened in Pietermaritzburg in 1990 was echoed again there and in Durban. But Pietermaritzburg and the country, led by Mandela as President, came out of that first violent disaster that largely affected KwaZulu-Natal and what is now called Gauteng. If we could come out of that period in which about 20 000 people were killed in several years of conflict, we can come out of this latest man-made disaster. It will require decisive leadership and the working together of people in all communities.

We pray that the leaders, existing and still to be found, will be empowered to lead us forward. Because it is us who give leaders power, may we be discerning in which leaders we follow.

Prayer (Natalie Regoli)

Isaiah 41:10

Do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Heavenly Father, Your Word declares that we will not be afraid nor dismayed because you are our God. Right now, Lord, we pray for leadership guidance for every leader, in Jesus' name. I pray that they will exercise faith, knowing that you will strengthen them and help them. You, Lord, will uphold them with your righteous hand. Thank you in advance for your divine strength for our leaders. Thank you for your guidance. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Eternal Father, I pray that you will give every leader strength, so they do not grow weary in their leadership role. Father, the tasks may seem overwhelming and exhausting, but I pray that every leader will recognize that they are assigned to do your will. Therefore, I know that at the right time, they will reap the rewards if they do not give up. Lord, I pray for divine strength for every leader and that they will not rely on themselves, but on you. Amen.

Dear Father, I pray that as they lead your people, leaders will not do it selfishly, for personal ambition or vain conceit. I pray that you help leaders to realize that leading is really a task that requires them to serve. So, Father, raise up servant leaders, in Jesus' name. Remove any selfish desires. Help them to work in humility. Make them selfless vessels of you, in your image. Amen.

Heavenly Father, thank You for our leaders. Right now, we pray for leadership guidance. Let every leader not seek to pursue their own interests, but to look at the interests of others. I pray that You help our leaders to identify the needs of Your people through divine wisdom and understanding. Lord, help them to not be ineffective leaders, but to act for the betterment of your Kingdom. Amen.

Jesus' mother and brothers

Matthew 12:46-50

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."

He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

As a student I once engaged in a fierce but friendly argument with a Jewish Classics lecturer who argued that Jesus was disrespectful to his mother. He quoted to me the King James translation of Jesus' answer to his mother when she asked him to do something about the wine shortage at the wedding at Cana – "Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee?" It does sound disrespectful. I told him it was a mistranslation and he rushed off to look at his Greek New Testament. And there it was, the Greek text says: "What is that **to me and to you?**" What Jesus is asking is whether this matter really is their concern. I start with this prologue to get out of the way the idea that Jesus had no concern for his mother and family. It is clear from various passages that his family were concerned that Jesus was somewhat out of control, they were worried for him, as indeed they should have been given that John the Baptist was beheaded. But we also see from John's account of the cross that Jesus' mother was there – plainly she accompanied them on the last journey to Jerusalem – and he gave her into the care of the beloved disciple. Although we don't hear directly of it, I think it is likely that the resurrected Jesus appeared to his sceptical brother James who in time became the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

What Jesus is saying is that doing the will of the Father – "your will come on earth as it is in heaven" – is the highest priority, above even that of doing the will of one's family and relatives, one's kith and kin, one's own ethnic group or tribe, or the will of any other human configuration.

And the people who do the will of the Father are our closest "relatives", our fellow "citizens" in the realm of the Father.

In these times of South African tribulation we will have many calls from others "wanting to speak to us" – in the streets, the social media, in our homes. Their requests and demands will be many, some no doubt good and fine. But our highest priority is to do the will of the Father on earth and to work with God's allies, the disciples, to effect God's instruction in Micah 6:8:

what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Prayer (Orthodox prayer adapted)

Almighty God, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,
come to our help and deliver us from the difficulties that beset us.

We believe Lord, that all trials of life are under your care
and that all things work for the good of those who love you.

Take away from me fear, anxiety and distress.
Help me to face and endure my difficulty with faith, courage and wisdom.

Grant that these trials may bring us closer to you
for you are our rock and refuge, our comfort and hope, our delight and joy.
We trust in your love and compassion.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Little things

Matthew 25:23

His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

In the midst of the depression caused by the damage done to us all last week, many spirits have been raised by local people coming out to clean up the debris left by the looters. The cynics of course have asked why they are cleaning up other people's mess and asking what the point of this voluntary work is.

There are in fact, very good arguments for doing this sort of thing – and not just because it gives some people a psychological boost to do at least something.

There is a growing wealth of research information showing that creating a clean and welcoming environment does in fact help people behave better. One of the experiments I read about involved dropping a banknote outside the door of a shop where the immediate environment and street were clean, tidy with no graffiti or litter. Passers-by invariably picked up the note and handed it in to the shop. The same shop was used again but the immediate environment was deliberately doctored to look run-down and littered. In this case most passers-by simply picked up the note and walked on.

This is not to suggest that a good environment makes us good, the sparkling environments the ultra-rich live in clearly do not, but it does suggest that degraded environments do not make for right living. Often it is the little things we can all do, like helping to keep one's own street clean or obeying the traffic rules, that encourage all to behave better. Last week I was looking out my front window and I saw an elderly couple walking down the pavement picking up litter from the gutter and carrying it away in plastic bags. I felt ashamed that I had never done that.

At the moment I suspect that most of us are hoping for the high-level instigators of the unrest to be arrested and convicted. But we all have to look at our daily lives and at the little things we could have done and didn't, the little acts of work and kindness that could have contributed to preventing what happened last week.

Even relatively good people are not immune to doing wrong things that they think they can get away with – violating traffic rules, paying small bribes when caught breaking traffic rules, fiddling one's income tax, etc. It can all be rationalised – "What about the worse taxi drivers?" "Going to court is too expensive!" "The government doesn't deserve my taxes!" But it all insidiously erodes the respect for the rule of law and a common society.

We can all do the little things. We do not have to be heroes or great leaders. We just have to live and do right things to help make the world right again.

Prayer (Blaise Pascal)

Teach us, Lord,
to do the little things
as though they were great
because of the majesty of Christ
who does them in us
and who lives our life.
Teach us to do the greatest things
as though they were little and easy
because of Christ's power!

The diaconate of all believers

Christians of all denominations believe that they are the special priesthood of all humanity. As it says in 1 Peter 2:9

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

It is we who can say thank you to the creator on behalf of all. We are the priests of creation – the sentient beings able to consciously respond to the divine.

What we may forget is that there are only two verses in one book in the New Testament that use this term. What is far more common is something of equal importance – the diaconate of all believers. The Greek word diakonia – service – is used 32 times in the New Testament and the word is used of Jesus Christ having come not to be served but to serve. And beyond the time of Jesus' ministry of service, the whole Church is to have the ministry of the Christ who came as a servant. Diakonia is to be characteristic of the ministry of the whole church.

Jesus' earthly ministry is characterised by service. His compassion for others is never mere pity – it expresses itself in action. His teaching and healing ministry, his diakonia, is a response. It happens because Jesus, "when he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and beaten down" (Matthew 9:35-36). Even when Jesus is in danger, he takes risks to serve. This is seen in the account of the feeding of the Five Thousand (Matthew 14:13-21). After the execution of John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples go into hiding. But the crowds seek him out. The disciples want to chase them away but Jesus says to them "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." And he ends up feeding them.

All the gospels stress that Jesus came to serve: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45; Matthew 20:28). In two remarkable passages we hear of Jesus confronting ambition and the desire to be the leader among his disciples and in the political world (Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 22:24-26):

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.

The culminating expression of this diakonia is seen in Jesus washing the feet of his disciples before the last supper (John 13:4-7):

Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.'

Will we understand? Yes we do see this diakonia in the many people responding to the current crisis, those who obey Jesus' word "you give them something to eat." We see it in those active in politics and the business world who do not want to lord it over people but wish to serve. We see it in working people and those cleaning up the mess. They are part of the diakonia of God.

Prayer

Almighty Father,
who sent you Son as your servant Jesus:
grant that we may faithfully serve with true humility,
following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who came to serve rather than to be served,
was compassionate to the needs of others,
ministered to all without fear or favour,
and loved humanity unconditionally.
We pray that we open our eyes and unfold our arms,
that we may see our brothers and sisters
and serve them rightly as your servants.
We ask for this in the name of Jesus the servant,
to whom be all honour and glory.

Amen

Stressed out

There are debates about how immune people are after they have survived Covid-19 and what percentage of immunity they have after being vaccinated. But there are no debates about anybody having immunity from the high degree of stress that has been experienced in the (so far) 480 days of lockdown and now the nearly two weeks of unrest/public violence/looting/failed coup d'état/insurrection. The anxiety of many people has peaked over the last two weeks. It has been an anxiety of the confined, locked down not merely by a deadly virus in a third wave of infection but by the very real danger of one's suburb or township being invaded by looters. And everybody knew – both the good and the bad, that the organs of the state were simply unable or unwilling to protect people.

It is bad enough that many, many people were already experiencing so-called cabin fever – that distressing claustrophobic irritability or restlessness experienced when one is stuck in confined quarters for an extended time. I really cannot fully imagine what it must be like for young people in particular. And then on top of that, the real fear once the attacks and looting began, all shown in graphic detail on our television screens.

Human beings are wired to flee or fight when they are in terrifying situations. Neither response is particularly helpful in the current circumstances. So we experience ongoing stress which can numb us emotionally, expose us to frightening dreams, prevent us from feeling positive emotions such as happiness, love or satisfaction and even lead to depression, hyper-vigilance, irritability and aggression.

What can we do about it?

Well we cannot all go on a long relaxing holiday! There is no running away from this reality.

We certainly can do much by mindfulness, by learning to identify where our own minds are hurting us through over-generalization, all-or nothing thinking, magical thinking, over-magnification of threats and such like. It does help if we can begin to understand what is going on - there are good sources of information and we must, as we have had to throughout the pandemic, detect fake news and panic-inducing misinformation. We can also provide reassurance to each other.

In some ways it is helpful to visualise the worst-case scenario and to estimate whether our own fears would really disable us – most people underestimate their resilience and ability to cope. And, of course, the Christian faith is built on events that were an utter catastrophe (the murder of an incarnate God) that turned into a eucatasrophe, a joyous resurrection of the good. We do have an inherently optimistic view of the unfolding events in the history of God's dealing with the world.

Prayer

Father, our Creator,
you know the difficult time we are in,
the struggle we have to cope with our reality,
our inability to handle the stress and uncertainty.
Grant the quietening of our out-of-control thoughts
our worries about what will happen,
and focus our thoughts on you and the good news.
Please help us to take one day at a time,
guide us to take control of our situations,
and to be led by your wisdom into assurance and peace.
Help us to do good to all while there is yet time,
Through the power of your Holy Spirit,
in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Citizen duty

Given that their Lord and God was judicially murdered by the ruling powers of that time, Christians ought to have an ambiguous attitude and relationship to rulers, governments and states. Indeed for much of the first three hundred years, Christians were considered by the ruling Roman empire as enemies of the state.

We the beneficiaries of centuries of struggles and debates about the matter, are now, whether we like it or not, the rulers of this state of South Africa through the procedures of representative government in a constitutional democracy. So we are in a doubly ambiguous position, we are warned by the teaching of the New Testament to have a somewhat critical view of rulers, yet we ourselves are now the rulers for we are part of the rule of the *demos* – the common people – of whom 17.6 million people out of an eligible 37.8 million people voted in the last election. (That was only 46.7% so clearly we are not overly enthusiastic about playing our part in electing our representatives in government.)

It can be argued that the events of the last two weeks have brought to the forefront the question of our duty as citizens. The very failure of the state through its security forces to provide protection against a conspiracy and the rioting and looting it unleashed, awakened a sense that this was now really **our** problem and we have to take responsibility to be good and active citizens. We have to move beyond the level of the individual being supportive of good government into working with other groups of people supportive of good government.

First, we need to disabuse ourselves that somehow our faith and the object of our faith, Jesus of Nazareth, is somehow detached from and “above” politics. Whenever the Church is attacked for “interfering in politics”, the critics claim, as if it were a generally accepted truth, that Jesus never denounced his rulers or in any way encouraged political change. On the contrary, a straightforward reading of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels shows us that we disciples may judge the state on the basis of our knowledge of the Kingdom of God, and that where the state transgresses its limits, the believer is relieved of obligation in that sphere.

Jesus frequently manifests a highly critical attitude to the political institutions of his day. We may note the following:

- Jesus had no special respect for rulers and calls Herod, his king, “that fox” (Luke 13:31-35.)
- He associated himself with John the Baptist, beheaded for denouncing corruption and Herod the king.
- He made it clear that he was not in favour of those who collaborated with the Roman rulers in extortion from the poor – for instance he lists tax-collectors together with other sinners (Mark 2:16-17, Matthew 21:31).
- He denounced the leading political-religious parties of his day – the Sadducees and Pharisees.

- In Luke 22:24-27 Jesus uses biting irony in condemning rulers who are oppressive and who yet claim to be the benefactors of their subjects. He says that his followers must behave in a completely different way.
- Jesus condemns the breaking of the rule of law and protests that his rights are being infringed. In John 18:23, after being struck by an officer without cause, he answers, “If I have spoken wrongly, state it in evidence; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” (These words of Jesus strike at the very basis of all arbitrary punishment without trial as was so prevalent in our apartheid regime past.)
- In the parable of the Last Judgement (Matthew 25:31-46), Jesus warns of the terrible judgement of the **nations** which have not fed the hungry, befriended the stranger, clothed the naked and helped the prisoner. The criterion of the worth of a nation is not the fervour of its religious belief, but its practical love in the field of social welfare.

Further, nearly all of Jesus’ actions have **strong political implications**. For instance:

- Some of his disciples (Simon the Zealot and possibly Peter, John, James, and Judas) may have been Zealots who believed that the Romans should be driven out by force. Jesus would not draw the line at them, any more than he would draw the line at Matthew the collaborator.
- Jesus was executed by the Romans for the alleged crime of claiming to be “King of the Jews.” Jesus started his ministry by quoting Isaiah 61:1-3, which is full of political implications.
- Jesus says that he comes “not to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil” and hence allies himself with the political-social teaching of the Old Testament and its record of prophetic protest against unjust authorities.
- Jesus’ claim that he was bringing in the Kingdom of God had very clear political implications. Certainly it included the idea that injustice and oppression should end. The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) gives a clear expression of these ideas. In cleansing the Temple by force, Jesus attacked corruption and exploitation and usurped the properly constituted authority of the Sanhedrin (Mark 11:15-18). The third beatitude states that the meek shall inherit the earth. This statement was seditious in the context of the Roman Empire.
- The doxology added to the end of the Lord’s Prayer “for Yours is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory” is seditious and his disciples committed an act of sedition every time they repeated it.

[To be continued]

Prayer (The "Romero prayer" by Ken Untener)

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No programme accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Citizen duty in a world of powers

If we South Africans are now ourselves the nominal rulers of our constitutional republican democracy, what do we make of the rest of the New Testament message? How does it make sense of, or expand on Jesus' words before Pilate: "My kingdom is not from this kosmos [the current world order]" (John 18:36)?

We can start with the letter of James because of its closeness to the Jewish world of early Christianity. It was supposedly written not by James the Apostle but by James the brother of Jesus who became the leader of the Christians remaining in Jerusalem. James writes in order to encourage his readers to live consistently with what they have learned in Christ and essentially talks about the moral life of the believers in a difficult world. He talks about endurance under persecution (1:2-3; 5:10-11), about poverty and wealth (1:9-11; 4:12; 5:1-6) and the necessity to care for orphans and widows.

Christians have to love righteousness and justice, fight poverty and care for the poor in practical ways (1:27; 2:5-7; 2:8; 2:14-19), stand up for the oppressed (2:1-4; 5:1-6) and not be "like the world" in responding to evil – they must be peacemakers (3:13-18). There must be no favouritism or inequality in the Church (2:1-7). James does not seek to explain or describe why the present world is badly ruled and unjust – what he does is reiterate the teaching of the law and the prophets.

With Paul we come to a far more dramatic description of the way this world, this kosmos, works and how Christians are to behave in it. Paul's revolutionary message about the gospel of Jesus has been so decisive that we sometimes forget where it came from. In modern society we nowadays take it as a given, an axiom, that all human beings have to be treated and valued equally. But that came from Paul when he said (Galatians 3:28):

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

And that message was to a world which considered foreigners as barbarians, slaves as animal beasts of burden, and women as biologically retarded versions of males.

Similarly Paul stated unequivocally that there should be no economic inequalities among Christians (2 Corinthians 8: 11-15).

He held that with the coming of Christ, the political institutions of the world could only have a secondary conditional authority. For him, the resurrection meant that "all rule and all authority and power" was abolished (1 Corinthians 15:24).

Along with many of his Jewish contemporaries, Paul believed that cosmic spiritual entities ruled the nations - today we use a similar language when we talk of the spirit of a nation or a spirit of populism. Christ's victory on the cross meant that these powers were dethroned, but they were still there, and sometimes had to be wrestled with by the faithful (Ephesians 6:12):

“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Indeed, what the Christian converts found so liberating was that the gospel’s rejection of these other powers and gods emancipated them from subservience to the malign cosmic principalities that enslaved the nations.

The passage in Romans 13: 1-7, often quoted by those trying to make Paul into an advocate of complete subservience to the state, only discusses the state as a useful guardian of law and order. It does not say anything about a state which has transgressed its limits and become oppressive. Paul says of the state that “rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.” When he wrote this, Paul was a Roman citizen, and experienced many benefits from that citizenship. But the Roman state soon showed its other, demoniac side and Paul was beheaded for “good conduct”.

What the New Testament makes clear is that the moral imperatives of the Old Testament continue in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. It is very clear how Christians are to behave – with compassion and continuous struggle against oppression, poverty and inequality. No edict from the “powers” must be allowed to inhibit that. The subsidiary powers – such as of ethnicity or party – have no final legitimate authority over us.

When we apply that message to ourselves who are the ‘rulers’ of South Africa, it is obvious what behaviour is expected even though it may involve much struggling against the spiritual forces of evil that are clearly at work in the current situation.

Prayer (Psalm 91)

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.’
For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling-place,
no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.

Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honour them.
With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

A basic right

Last night we heard the State President speak again. I thought he came across rather better than usual, though I wish he had separated a speech to encourage us all to stand firm and united from an address about the details of lockdown and business reconstruction regulation changes.

The matter of lockdown severity is a hugely contentious matter worldwide. It is difficult to get the balance right between protecting the whole population from infection and the interests of businesses and their shareholders and employees. Humanitarian interests may initially predominate (as they did last year with the initial lockdown) but soon economic factors push us towards opening up. We will no doubt continue to yo-yo between the two, with further lockdowns until the entire world is vaccinated. Unfortunately that is unlikely to be soon because of the moronic ignorance and political evil of the anti-vaccination lobby, particularly in the United States of America but also present in South Africa.

What was good news was that the emergency grant of R350 a month for unemployed people was to be reinstated. With nearly 40% of the adult population unemployed, that small sum of R350 could be a literal lifesaver. Ironically, few people seem to realise, when they praise our wonderful constitution, that Section 27 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution in effect guarantees a basic income:

27. (1) Everyone has the right to have access to —
 - (a) health care services, including reproductive health care;
 - (b) sufficient food and water; and
 - (c) social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependants, appropriate social assistance.
- (2) The state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of each of these rights.
- (3) No one may be refused emergency medical treatment.

Whatever we say about the current situation in South Africa, the most unequal society in the world, the reality is that our past history, the failure of our education system, and global economic practices, have lead inexorably to nearly half our population needing to access “sufficient food and water” to live. And they have to get it from the other part of the population. And this is a duty of all of us, both as constitutional citizens who run a democracy and as people of faith.

As James 2:15-16 puts it:

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

It was good news that the state, using our taxes, will supply some “bodily needs”.

Today I got an email from a friend in the United States who had been a development worker in South Africa. This is what he wrote:

“The pastor of the church in Utica is demonstrating (weekend in a cage in front of the church) in support of the church's ministry to the homeless and poor. Supporters are taking turns praying prayers for the poor while he remains silent for the weekend. The church is experiencing considerable pressure and criticism.”

Maybe more church congregations need to take seriously the misery of the poor in South Africa and we all need to mobilise to make the necessary changes to end that misery.

Prayer

Creator God, who instructed your chosen people to
“Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land”:
Uncage our hearts that we may feel the misery of the poor and the alien,
Strip us of our desire to gather in all of the wealth that we can,
Make our will aright that we may love others as we love ourselves;
That we do all in our power as individuals and citizens
to work for the good and unity of all.
This we ask through the strength of your Son, our liberator,
who for our sakes became poor.
Amen

Do we need a sabbath?

Every now and then I get queries from church-going people who have been challenged by friends or acquaintances for supposedly not following God's commands – on such things as the holding the Sabbath sacred.

Although it might seem that there is a simple answer to this – according to Paul, speaking on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles – the whole Old Testament Law (the Torah) is abrogated by Christ (Ephesians 2:15):

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

We also know that the early church leaders met in Jerusalem under the leadership of Peter and James the brother of Jesus and made ruling that Gentiles were not to be burdened by the Mosaic Law but that they should consider Jewish Christian sensitivities and (Acts 15:20):

abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.

These rules made sense. It would be offensive to buy food sacrificed to idols (which happened in the pagan markets of those days) or that had been strangled (also in the pagan markets) and to indulge in fornication (that is using pagan temple prostitutes). But there is not a word about the Sabbath.

Christians in the early church did gather on a Sunday to worship the Lord Jesus, because he rose on the first day of the week. But this had nothing to do with the Sabbath. After the Protestant reformation many countries imposed Sabbath-like laws on the Sunday (all shops closed, etc.) but this had no genuine theological warrant and it has tended to disappear as societies became more secular in the modern world.

Now there is a very good reason for having a once-a-week day of rest for people and most countries in the world, even non-Christian ones, have one. It is here that one has to take very seriously the spirit of the Old Testament Law and apply the principle Jesus enunciated (Mark 2:26-28):

“The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath”.

The majority of Old Testament laws make sense, not as a means of over-regulating society, but as indicating the spirit in which we should all live in obeying that second and extremely broad commandment that Jesus enunciated (Mark 12:31):

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Our human experience of Law is often of rules made by the rich and the powerful to control the rest of us. The spirit of many of the Old Testament Laws has the opposite tendency – to protect ordinary people from exploitation. The Sabbath laws insisted on rest for all, including slaves and animals. The Sabbatical seventh year was an ecological one designed to give fields a rest. The Jubilee Year (after seven times seven Sabbath years, year 50) compelled the rich to give back to the original owners of land or property, what had been lost because of debt.

So though one can rightfully say that Christians are not bound by the ritual rigidities of the Torah, the spirit of justice and fairness remains for all of us to follow. And so though we do not need to keep a Sabbath, we need to be alert when trends in modern society make it increasingly difficult for workers to have time from recreation.

Prayer (Sam Hamilton-Poore)

Grant me grace this day
to rest and remember
that there is nothing I have to do,
nothing I have to buy or sell,
nothing I have to produce or consume
in order to become who I already am:
your beloved creation.
May your overworked creation
and those who cannot rest today
come to know the liberation of your sabbath.

Provision is made

The last two weeks have made us very conscious about shortages of personnel and the need for food provision. Why were there not enough police on call when we really needed them? Where were the resources going to come from to provide food for everyone and to rebuild? Can the fragile unity that held out against the de-stabilisers and wreckers hold?

The Anglican Church readings (Ephesians 4:1-16 and John 6:24-35) for the coming Sunday could almost be seen as a reflection and meditation on these issues.

The passage from Ephesians starts with a plea from the imprisoned Paul to his fellow Christians to continue living with humility, love and unity:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

That call for love and unity must resonate out beyond the Christian communities to all. South Africa desperately needs love and unity and humility. And Paul says that the Father of all is in fact with us, "through all and in all", in the current situation.

We know that things are bad and we lack leaders and workers to do what is right. Even at the level of Church organisation the churches have been hammered financially by the pandemic, a secondary blow from the tremendous loss of jobs and productivity. In my own diocese we have a far reduced number of church supported ordained ministers.

But Paul has a message of hope and assurance here – we have gifts from Christ. It is a twofold message. Paul explains why there is hope and in what that hope entails.

Paul's explanation is that through the coming of Jesus the Christ and his death and resurrection, somehow the "principalities and powers" that normally hold humankind in captivity have been spiritually defanged. They no longer hold the keys to our human-made cages of greed and hate. We have been liberated from them so that we can, now be humble, loving and unified.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

What Paul says is that what we are given now is the capacity to hold the church of his people together and to ensure that it is inspired, trained, taught, and sent out. This is an amazing promise and gift. (And we have to confess that our church institutions have been remiss in not having faith in that promise.) For the promise is simple. Whatever the circumstances, however dire the situation, Christ has given the Church and every group of people gathered together that make up that whole Church, the gift of being able to build itself up in love.

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

It is that body that has to go out into the situation of South Africa today and do its work.

Prayers

(R. Tagore)

This is my prayer to you, my Lord;
Give me strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows;
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service;
Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent
might.
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to your will with love.

(Julian of Norwich)

God of goodness, give me yourself.
For you are sufficient for me
If I were to ask for anything less
I should always be in want,
for in you alone do I have all.

Providing bread

The Anglican Church Gospel reading for the coming Sunday (John 6:24-35) is about bread.

When they found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

John's Gospel is a somewhat perplexing one for modern readers because, unlike the other three gospel writers, it does not appear to be a straightforward account of what happened. It is as much meditation on what happened as it is description. Thus, for example, John does not mention the words Jesus said over the bread and wine at the Last Supper (the Christian communities he wrote the Gospel for, would of course all have been familiar with them) but provides a commentary on them in telling us about the aftermath of the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

At the Feeding of the Five Thousand Jesus had, as a card player would say, revealed his hand. In his compassion for the hungry he exposes to the authorities that he is the Messiah – for it is such a thing that a Messiah would do. He also exposes himself to the threat of misunderstanding by the common people, to be mistaken for a political actor, to be tempted again to be a this-world ruler. Both misperceptions do not see what the giving of bread – bread at the Feeding of the Five Thousand, bread in the Eucharist – is. It is a sign of God's action, of God's giving of himself.

Bread for oneself is a material question. People need it to live. So provision of bread to all becomes a political question. Organised society is meant to deliver bread. In the recent events in South Africa, bread became very obviously a political matter. Instigators and looters 'ate their fill of the loaves'. As a result, for days even the middle classes had no bread to buy. For the really poor, the lack of bread in the months ahead will be devastating.

Bread for others is a spiritual question. Jesus gave himself for others. He gave bread to the hungry and that event was one of the precipitating factors that led to his arrest and crucifixion. In the words spoken at the Last Supper, Jesus irrevocably links his total self-giving of himself – the death of his body, the shedding of his life blood – to the giving of bread. That will forever be the **sign** of what he has done and of his ongoing presence. In recognizing the bread and wine as this sign, we identify with, we are joined to that Body and Life given.

And that is why John can write:

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

So the question of the provision of bread is, and must be, very central to our lives and the way we live.

We have to answer the question of how bread can be provided to all people. There is a lot of work to be done to achieve this in South Africa.

We have to avoid the temptation of bread, for we do not live by material bread alone.

We need to see the sign of bread provided. In that sign we see the presence of the love of God. We see it in the ritual of the Eucharist and we see it the holy work of bread being given to the hungry.

Prayers (John Birch)

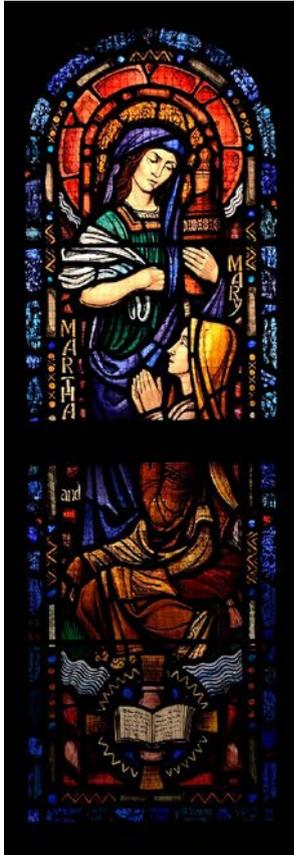
Bread of Life, you feed us through word and sacrament.
The bread we share a remembrance of your presence with us.
Strengthen us for service, that seeds we sow in fertile places might grow and flourish,
that food we share in fellowship might nourish and revive,
that words we share in our daily walk might glorify your name.
Bread of Life, you feed us through word and sacrament that we might feed others.
Blessed be your name!

When the journey is long and we hunger and thirst,
Bread of Life, you sustain us.
When the road is hard and our bodies weak
Bread of Life, you heal us.
When our spirits are low and we can't carry on
Bread of Life, you revive us.
When we offer our hand in love and in service
Bread of life, you bless us.
When the challenge is great and the workers are few
Bread of Life, you empower us.
When the victory is won and we see your face
Bread of Life, you will rejoice with us!

We bless you,
God of Seed and Harvest
Provider of our daily bread
And we bless each other
That the beauty of this world
And the love that created it
Might be expressed through our lives
And be a blessing to others,
Now and always.

Marthas in action

Today is the celebration of two complementary saints – Martha and Mary of Bethany. More than a year ago I spoke about the danger of “busywork” in relation to the story of these two (John 10:38-42) and how, in lockdown, busywork seemed to expand in scope and the time allotted to it.



Martha has always had something of a bad press saying that her busyness cut her off from things of great value. True as that is, maybe in the current circumstances we may need a lot more Martha-like behaviour.

We also have to confess, and particularly men have to confess, that much of our supposed Mary-like behaviour (being more thoughtful and intellectual and suchlike) is a confidence trick. We just don't like doing the draggy chores of housework and cooking and washing clothes and much prefer being on our computer doing intellectual work and planning and other “real work” related things.

One of the persistent dangers for people who like to understand things (and indulge in a lot of intellectual work to do so – reading newspapers and articles and books) is that they gain a deep sense of accomplishment simply by knowing. It is a kind of gnosticism – they become the knowing ones – and that's it, done!

Meanwhile it is the Marthas, who live in a world that goes on sublimely indifferent to what the knowing ones think, who do the actual work that keeps us alive and fed and clothed.

I think we have all been challenged over the last few weeks when it has been the practical Marthas who have delivered bread and milk to those without, have cleaned up after the looters, have kept things going and given all of us some hope.

We know that active doing can also be a refuge from thinking about things, but it is clear that the Marthas have come to the fore, female and male and of all faiths and persuasions. Their responses to the insurrection and looting have been deeply concerned and thoughtful in what they have done. This doing has been an expression of love. And they are still busy doing it now, showing that love.

That both Martha and Mary are celebrated reminds us that both the quiet spirituality and the active service are both important. But maybe we can be shaken out of complacency and regain the fullness of the diaconal – the service – ministry that expresses the coming of a one who came to serve.

Prayer

Let us pray for the world and all its people in need,
and may we be Christ's hands in serving.

We pray for all those who feed the hungry and advocate for the powerless.

We pray for peace and justice in all our communities.

We pray that all who serve others will do so with love and thoughtfulness.

May we, in our lives, support all those who answer the call to serve in difficult times.

May we be strengthened by the spirit of Jesus who came to serve.

Amen.

St Stephen – deacon

Today is the celebration of the first martyr and one of the first deacons – Stephen (normally it is held on the 26th of December). The name Stephanos is a Greek one and, as it means ‘wreath’ or ‘crown’, it may actually be a title – martyr’s crown – rather than his actual name.

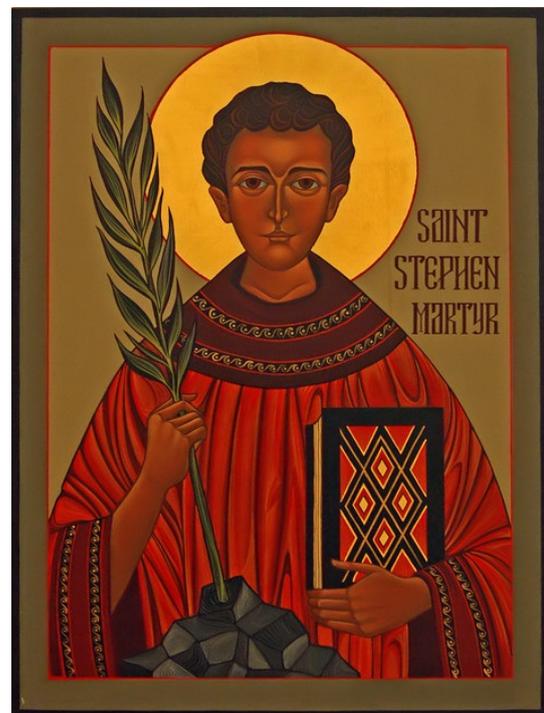
Stephen is first mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles Chapter 6 as one of seven Greek speaking Jews selected by the apostles to ensure that there was a fair distribution of welfare to the Greek speaking widows in the early Church in Jerusalem.

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.’ What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So, right at the beginning, the Church was concerned about social welfare and poverty relief and provided an ordained ministry to provide such service.

Of course Stephen is not renowned only for humble service keeping the accounts of the food delivery to the poor, but also for his teaching and preaching of the gospel. It was his preaching and debating in the Greek speaking synagogues in Jerusalem that led to his denunciation, arrest, and execution by stoning. It is instructive also that another fellow deacon, Philip, was an effective evangelist in Samaria and Gaza and makes the first African convert – the official from Ethiopia.

So here we have the model of the ordained minister of diaconal service who is also able to preach and teach. Indeed the Acts of the Apostles Chapter 7 places the first presentation of a Christian view of Israel’s history in Stephen’s defence speech at his trial.



The Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Coptic, Ethiopian and Lutheran churches all view Stephen as saint and first martyr. Depictions of Stephen usually show him with a crown symbolising martyrdom, three stones, martyr's palm frond, censer, and often holding a miniature church building. He is often shown as a young, beardless man wearing a deacon's vestments.

Prayer

Almighty Father,
We give you thanks for St Stephen
chosen by your Apostles to serve the Church
in humble service to the poor.
We give thanks to you, O Lord of glory
for the example of the first martyr
who looked up to heaven and prayed
for his persecutors to your Son Jesus Christ,
who stands at your right hand,
where he lives and reigns with you and
the Holy Spirit, One God,
in glory everlasting.

Amen.



Worship and service

The story of St Stephen raises the question of whether the Church can exercise relevant ministry to the world while holding inadequate conceptions of ministry and congregation, of worship and service. What is the connection between congregational worship – the familiar ‘Church on Sunday’ service – and diaconal service?

It is interesting to note the link between *leiturgia* (worship service) and *diakonia* (table service) in the Old Testament.

- People need to be loving, sharing with the unprotected poor (Exodus 22:21-27; Leviticus 25:35-38; Job 29:12-17)
- This kind of service is true worship (Deuteronomy 10:12-19; Isaiah 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:8; etc.)
- Such service found expression especially at religious festivals when gifts were distributed and the rich ate together with the poor and rejoiced together to illustrate the blessings of the future (Deuteronomy 12:7,12, 18-19; 14:26-29; 16:9-12, 13-15; 26:10-11; 2 Samuel 6:18-12; 1 Chronicles 16:1-3; 2 Chronicles 30:21-25).

The link between *leiturgia* and *diakonia* continues in the New Testament. To note in particular are:

- The feeding of the 5,000 which was a messianic sign, a banquet, and service – Jesus says: “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” (Matthew 14:13-21) and the apostles distribute food (Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13)
- The parables of the kingdom – the King’s banquet, the bringing in of the poor and outcast (Matthew 22:4-10; Luke 14:18-24)
- The association of *diakonia* with the Last Supper, especially in Luke 22:24-27 and John 13:2-17.

The new covenant meal of the Last Supper, our Eucharist, is the source of *diakonia*.

The same link is found in the practice of the early Church.

In that earliest Christian community in Jerusalem, there was the same close relationship between liturgy and service (Acts 2:42-46), there was an equitable distribution of food (‘serving tables’) described in Acts 6:1-6 (and problems in equitable distribution led to the first ordained ‘deacons’). The whole Church collects provision for the care of the poor and widows in Jerusalem during a famine there (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15; Galatians 2:10; Romans 15:25-31). The Eucharist originally includes a fellowship meal though in time this become separated into Eucharist and agape meal because of administration problems (Jude 12).

Given that the provision and equitable division of the resources for life – the economy and politics – are major drivers of human history and human conflict, it is unsurprising that the early Church had to deal with that problem too. But what should remain central is the link between worship and service.

In the simplest of terms, Christians who daily recite the Lord's Prayer – "Give us this day our daily bread" are obliged to provide service that sees that all get their daily bread.

Prayer

Father to whom I pray for daily bread,
I thank you that my needs are met:
Make me an instrument for you,
to be an answer for those that hunger,
restore hope in the present,
and banish fear about the future,
through your Son who gave himself
to be the sacred bread of life eternal.
Amen.

Diaconal service and service by deacons

In my previous homily I indicated that for the early Church there was an inextricable link between worship service (epitomised in the Eucharist) and service to others shown by providing for the poor and widows and administered by 'deacons' as in the Acts 6 account.

Although it is historically true that ordained deacons have been seen as important providers of the Church's charity, it is a great misreading to think that somehow the Church can "sub-contract" or "out source" all such provision for the needy to a few deacons.

The key to the Church's service to others, its diakonia, is shown in John's account of the Last Supper where Jesus shows the true nature of his Messiahship by acting like a servant (John 13:1-7) as well as in Luke's account of Jesus' teaching about greatness (Luke 22:24-30). Jesus supports his disciples by given them the ultimate form of service – his very life – and the bread and wine he gives them show this.

What is clear is that, enlivened by the regular repetition of the giving of bread and wine as a nourishment and support for his disciples across time and space, the disciples are to model their lives on Jesus' self-giving.

Modelling our lives on Jesus' self-giving means that we can no longer operate on the principles of the current world order – on power, wealth, fame and its consequences of domination, oppression and the idolatry of the celebrity – but on the principles of the Kingdom of God. The disciples have to reject the "realities" of the current world order. The power they have been given leads them to live in a different way – "But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." (Luke 22: 26-27).

Seen in this context, diakonia means that we as disciples are commissioned to serve the other disciples – and the needy in this world and through them, Christ himself. And we are led by a Messiah who acted as a servant.

The diakonia of the disciples also needs leadership and when it comes to people who are ordained to be deacons, they are simply those who have been authorised by the Church to lead and guide our diaconal activities. These activities are far more expansive than simply distributing food to the poor. As Ignatius of Antioch, an early 2nd century martyr put it: "They are not deacons of food and drink but are officers of the Church of God."

I would argue that we are in great need of a renewal of the order of deacons and that we must understand the relationship of the diaconate of us all, and of specially committed deacons, to the Church's liturgy of worship.

Prayer (Amy Ekeh)

Lord Jesus Christ, Servant of all,
Send your Spirit upon me as I serve your Church.
Give me eyes to see the needs of your people.
Give me a discerning mind to know your truth.
Give me a generous spirit when I am tired but needed.
Give me a humble heart when my work goes unnoticed.
Give me peace of mind in obedience and service.
Give me health of body so I may serve with strength.
Make me fertile ground for your inspiration and love.
Comfort me when I question myself and my ministry.
Grant me grace as I age so I may share your wisdom.
Make my heart like yours so I may love your people.

Amen.

Worshipful service

In the this time of the pandemic we have got used to being told not to attend the gathering of the faithful every Sunday during the higher levels of lockdown. We may even have got accustomed to participating in an online service on Sunday in our pyjamas. Understandable as this situation is, it distances us from the depth of commitment of those first Christians to that gathering together on the first day of the week.

What was it about those gatherings, held in larger homes or hired venues, for there were no church buildings in those days, that was so important, so significant? And how does what happened there help explain how the structures and leadership of the Church evolved so rapidly? The Church practice in those gatherings is such that a 2nd century Christian transported by time machine to the present would still recognize the format of the worship and the three-fold leadership order of bishop, priests (presbyters or elders) and deacons (though the time traveller would wonder why the bishop was not around all that much and why there were so few real deacons).

In that Sunday gathering there was a dynamic bringing together of liturgy (the worship of the one true God) and diakonia (service) that had been revealed and demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in his ongoing presence in his body the Church and especially in its Eucharistic gathering. In the Revelation of John of Patmos, there are visionary depictions of the worship in heaven that undoubtedly mirrored what was happening in the worshipping community on earth. This Eucharistic gathering was seen as a microcosm, an earthly reflection, of the worship in heaven.

The Bishop would have presided over the Eucharist, accompanied by the elder leadership of the community (what we now call the priests), and the bishop would have been assisted by deacons, both male and female. Ignatius, martyred about AD 108, Bishop of Antioch, described it thus (Letter to the Magnesians, 6:1):

“Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, and with the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles, and with the deacons, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest” .

The deacons played an especially important role in leading the diakonia, the ministry of that whole community. Another early church document, the *Teaching of the Apostles* (Didascalia Apostolorum), a manual on Church practice written in Syria about AD 230, describes the deacon as being in the service of the bishop, acting as a manager and reporting to the Bishop what is necessary.

The deacons were a distinctive ministry of service and agency, working to inspire, equip and mobilise the congregation in their ministries of service, healing, care and justice. As such, they were sacramental signs of the presence of Christ in all places of need. Ignatius adds (Letter to the Trallians 2:1-3):

“It is fitting also that the deacons, as being dispensers of the mysteries [sacraments] of Jesus Christ, should in every respect be pleasing to all.”

They would present the offerings of the community at the gathering, see that they were shared, and ensure that those who could not get to the gathering (the sick, the imprisoned, women unable to leave the confines of the homes, slaves) were served. The *Didaskalia* notes the important role of female deacons here:

“For there are houses where you cannot send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen, but you may be able to send a deaconess.”

They would report to the bishop on the needs of all so that decisions could be made and action planned.

“And be you (bishop and deacon) of one counsel and of one purpose, and one soul dwelling in two bodies. ... It is required of you deacons therefore that you visit all who are in need, and inform the bishop of those who are in distress; and you shall be his soul and his mind; and in all things you shall be taking trouble and be obedient to him.” (iii.13).

It was that sort of enthusiasm and church order that would get one out of bed on the first day of the week to gather with the worshipping and serving community of love in action.

Prayer (Lazaro Ulloa)

Come to my assistance my Lord and my God, that I may do for you all that you ask.

Strengthen me in adversity and do not let me succumb to my feelings of worthlessness.

Help me to feel in my heart all that you speak to me, and help me to understand.

May I be to others what they need: a body to work when others cannot;

a heart to love those who are forgotten;

a shoulder to console those whose soul is in need;

a smile to brighten the most sombre of your children;

a mouth to proclaim your love.

Let me be to You, as a brush is to a painter, worthless without you, but capable of transforming the human heart by the power of your mercy.

Send me, my Lord if you need me, to touch others as you would touch them, to hold them as you would, to love them as only you can.

Make my heart like yours, that I may forgive everything and love beyond my own human frailty.

Come live within me, that I may die to myself so you may fill my very being.

Let me serve others as you would serve them, that in doing so I may serve you.

Do not let me fail, oh Lord, or lead your people astray.

Allow me to live in your presence today, that tomorrow I may die in your hands and may you raise me one day that I may touch your face and live in your glory.

Amen.

St Laurence – the comedian

Continuing on the theme of diakonia and deacons, today is the celebration of St Laurence, martyred in Rome in AD 258.

Laurence, born in Spain in AD 225, and traditionally thought to be the child of two martyrs, came under the influence of a Greek-born Christian teacher, Sixtus, and accompanied him to Rome where Sixtus was elected Bishop of Rome. Sixtus II ordained Laurence as a deacon, where he became the head, the archdeacon, of the seven deacons of the central church in Rome.

As archdeacon he was the manager of the 'treasury' of the church (donations from wealthier Christians) used for the distribution to the poor. It was position of great responsibility.

Although it was a general rule that any Christians denounced to the Roman authorities would be executed and their goods seized, in August 258 a serious persecution began when Emperor Valerian ordered that all bishops, priests and deacons should immediately be executed. Sixtus II and four deacons were captured while celebrating the Eucharist and immediately decapitated. This is the inscription on Sixtus II's tomb:

At the time when the sword pierced the bowels of the Mother, I, buried here, taught as Pastor the Word of God; when suddenly the soldiers rushed in and dragged me from the chair. The faithful offered their necks to the sword, but as soon as the Pastor saw the ones who wished to rob him of the palm (of martyrdom) he was the first to offer himself and his own head, not tolerating that the (pagan) frenzy should harm the others. Christ, who gives recompense, made manifest the Pastor's merit, preserving unharmed the flock.



Later, Laurence and the other two deacons were also arrested and it was demanded of Laurence that he turn over all the wealth of the church. Laurence said that it would take three days to gather it all in and he was released to do so. He rapidly sold off all the resources and distributed the proceeds to the poor. According to the traditional account, on the third day, he handed himself at the appointed time, accompanied by a small delegation of the poor, crippled, blind and unwanted of Rome.

Laurence said to the Roman Prefect:

“Your honour, these are the treasures of the Christian Church. The Church is truly rich, far richer than your emperor.”

He was immediately executed. The story that he was roasted on a gridiron and cheerily said "I'm well done on this side. Turn me over!" is legendary but one can see why he became the patron saint of comedians (alongside librarians, archivists, cooks, tanners and miners).

In the power and heroism of the story of Laurence one can see the deeper meaning of the diaconal ministry.

Prayers (Catholic Church)

O glorious Saint Lawrence, Martyr and Deacon,
who, being subjected to the most bitter torments,
did not lose your faith nor your constancy in confessing Jesus Christ,
obtain in like manner for us such an active and solid faith,
that we shall never be ashamed to be true followers of Jesus Christ,
and fervent Christians in word and in deed,
even in spite of trials, persecutions, or the sword.
Amen.

Lord Jesus, we pray,
that the flames of your Divine love
may burn away all traces of vice within us,
and that we may be practical and zealous
in the service of the poor.
Amen.



No eternal lockdown

Some 561 days ago I wrote the first of these lockdown homilies. I never imagined that more than a year and a half later we would still be in lockdown. Lockdown was meant to protect us from a deadly virus by essentially putting us all into quarantine. But it is becoming more and more apparent that this method of war against the virus has failed. And this failure has real consequences for what “normal” life will be in the future.

I have been regularly updating myself on the latest findings about the Covid 19 virus. These findings are already leading to changes in the way most countries will attempt to handle the virus in the future. Here is a brief summary of the findings:

- **So-called herd immunity will never been achieved.** There was the hope that when a sufficient number of people (about 70% of the population) had been infected and were now immune and enough people had been vaccinated the virus would fail to spread further. The reason this will not be achieved is that the new variants of the virus are far more transmissible and can infect even those who have been vaccinated. It is now inevitable that over the next few years virtually everyone will get infected or reinfected. Lockdowns will become pointless.
- **Sensible measures such as wearing masks indoors will still be useful,** simply in slowing down the number of people being infected at any one time. The vaccinated who are infected (though symptomless) will wear masks to try and prevent them infecting the unvaccinated. But these measures will not stop the overall spread of the virus.
- **The decisive gap now will be between those who are vaccinated and those who are not.** Both will still be infected but the vaccinated will, on the whole, have few or no symptoms and only a very small minority will be hospitalised. The unvaccinated will suffer the full consequences of infection and, as more severe variants arise, their death rates will rise, including among children.
- **Increasingly, states, institutions and businesses will insist on a vaccination passport** for employment and travel. It will be an economic necessity. An annual vaccination (possibly for influenza at the same time) will become virtually mandatory.
- **Conspiracy theorist spreaders, anti-vaxxers and spreaders of associated fake news are, and will be increasingly publicly seen as, the enemies of humanity and of themselves.** They are already, in effect, decimating themselves in the United States of America.

How will Christians fare in this new post-lockdown Covid-infested world. It will be a world in which the sense of ‘community’ and ‘gathered-together’ are far more fragile. It will be a world in which the unvaccinated may be increasingly seen as an inferior if not dangerous class of people. Caring for ourselves and the others will be more challenging.

The situation will require a really long haul mentality. Christians will need to be courageous in their relationship with and care for the unvaccinated – people who are a danger to themselves and others through their own mistaken choice or ignorance and who will bear the brunt of disabling disease. Church congregations, wanting to gather together again as before, will be faced with what to do about congregants who will not vaccinate or wear masks. The same will apply in the workplace and elsewhere. We are all in for challenging and ethically ambiguous times.

Prayers (www.living-prayers.com)

Lord, I reach out to you for your guidance.
Please show me which way to turn.
Calm my anxious thoughts, come speak into my mind.
Strengthen me as I falter and feel weary.
May I feel strength rising up within my heart.
Bring clarity into my visions and dreams.
I trust that you are with me, no matter where I go,
Or what I decide to do.
You journey with me always.
Amen.

O Lord,
You are the light that guides my feet.
You are the map that gives me direction.
You are the peace that makes me strong.
You are the leader whom I faithfully follow.

May your light illuminate my life
And your guidance bring direction.
May I find inspiration in your word
And peace in my heart as I follow you.

The meaning of words – *diakonia*

Sometimes we are not aware how ideas and practices change, often quite radically, over time. For Christians, the changes in their thought often come because people keep discovering, or rather rediscovering, what is in the Christian scriptures. One example of this was the rediscovery that the New Testament contained two types of material – *kerygma* (preaching/proclamation) which was the core evangelical message of the Church and *didache* (the teaching) which was ethical instruction and homilies to a congregation already established in the faith. It was the scholar C.H. Dodd who introduced this finding to the English speaking world in 1936.

Now a new set of meanings for an old word is coming into prominence – that of *diakonia*. Now the word *diakonia* has multiple meanings and has usually been translated into English as “ministry” or “service”. In 1990 the scholar John Collins published a ground breaking study of the use of the word “diakonia” in the Greek speaking world of New Testament times. He found that in the recent past *diakonia* had been interpreted as menial service, which he believed was incorrect. The new understanding of *diakonia* is seen in comparing the 1979 and 2000 editions of ***Bauer’s Greek-English lexicon***:

The change is from *diakonia* being translated as:

- wait on someone at table
- serve generally, of services of any kind
- care for, take care of
- help, support someone
- the church office of somebody who does these things – a deacon

to

- function as an intermediary, act as a go-between/agent, be at one’s service with intermediary function either expressed or implied
- perform obligations, without focus on intermediary function
- meet an immediate need, help
- carry out official duties, minister.
- rendering of specific assistance, aid, support; send someone something for support

This has immense implications for what we understand to be the function of the order of deacons in the Church. Deacons were not menial skivvies but agents and officials of the Church. The Church had not sub-contracted, or outsourced, service to the needy and poor to deacons, letting the rest of us off the hook. Service and care for all was the duty of the whole Church, of all Christians. But it was the mandatory task of deacons to get it organised – whether that was by preaching, evangelising, exhortation, research or simply good management of resources. Deacons were there to get us all to do loving service. And their authority to do this was from the Lord.

Prayer (Adapted from a Methodist diaconal rededication prayer)

Let us give thanks to God for the ministry of deacons;
For God's sovereign love promising to make all things new;
for the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for all the world;
for his abundant grace, our example and hope;
for the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the people of God and for the church
which has nourished and sustained us;
for the call which we heard and the ways in which it has since been renewed;
for the power of Christ's gospel to search us out and reclaim us when we have
lost the way;
for the ways in which God has sustained us in times of doubt and difficulty and
enabled us to learn from weakness and failure;
for the joy of serving others in the name of Christ;
for the privilege of sharing in the pilgrimage of faith and the ministry of others;
for what we have received from those we sought to serve.

Reconsidering Acts 6

In the last homily, I mentioned that words often change meaning over time and sometimes their original meaning has to be refreshed if they are to regain their original power – as with the term *diakonia* (service). The same thing happens with the interpretation of stories, and one such story is that found in Acts 6:1-7.

If you follow the account in most of the common English translations, you are told that in the young church in Jerusalem, the Greek-speaking widows were not getting their fair share of the daily distribution of food. The apostles did not want to neglect their preaching of the word of God, so they appointed seven men to handle this somewhat menial task. This text is regularly used as the text for the ordination of deacons and perhaps suggests that they must expect to do menial service whilst they are still in training to become priests when they will be able to do the superior ministry of the word! As was pointed out even in ancient times, this interpretation is rather confusing because two of these seven were soon out preaching and converting with such enthusiasm that Stephen gets martyred (Acts 6:8-7:60) and Philip converts the first African, an Ethiopian (Act 8:26-40). Clearly not in their waiting-on-tables job-description! Something odd here, surely?

The problem is that the word *diakonia* in this passage has been translated, and maybe misleadingly so, in three different ways.

My usual English Bible (New Revised Standard Version) says “the widows were being neglected in the “daily **distribution of food**”. But in the original Greek text, there is no mention of the distribution of food: it says “daily *diakonia*”. Then it says the seven have to “**wait** on tables”. The Greek text says “*diakonia* of tables”. And lastly, the apostles, by appointing these men, are said to have been freed to engage in “**servicing** the word”. But the Greek says the apostles do the “*diakonia* of the word”.

So the single Greek word *diakonia* has been translated as referring to the distribution of food, being a waiter, and being a minister serving the word. Given that Jesus said (in Mark 10:45) that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” the word service (*diakonia*) has to have a more multi-dimensional meaning than any single one of these interpretations, one that covers many forms of God-commissioned service.

Unfortunately, because of such interpretations, charitable or welfare or justice actions may be taken as inferior to “preaching the word” and the *diakonia* of this type may not be seen as essential – it can be sub-contracted out to ‘deacons’ or welfare societies instead of being something that all Christians have to do if they are true followers of him who came to do *diakonia*.

So re-looking at 6:1-7, one can now have a very different reading:

The writer of Acts has already told us that the Christian community was a sharing community and all the believers shared and were cared for in their community. It is improbable that some widows would not be given any food at a communal meal. But

the disciples were growing in number and complaints arose from the Greek-speaking disciples that their widows were being neglected in the daily *diakonia*. This first verse mention of *diakonia* probably refers to administrative responsibility, one of whose aspects is concern for widows, without specifying the kind of assistance required. The apostles, who were all Aramaic (Hebrew) speaking, were constantly engaged in preaching and evangelising in the Temple (the *diakonia* of the word). They probably did not have the language or cultural capacity to serve the needs among the Greek speakers. Indeed it is likely that the Greek-speaking widows were excluded from hearing the preaching, both because of a language barrier, and on account of their custom of staying in the home. So the apostles ask the Greek speakers to select some suitable people (“full of the Spirit and of wisdom”) to deal with this. The seven Greek-speaking men were therefore commissioned to take the preaching into the widows’ homes and any other necessary service, while the apostles were freed up to carry on the public preaching (in Aramaic) of the Word in the Temple.

It is not a story about some people being delegated to run a soup-kitchen but about selecting people to lead the full *diakonia*, what Christ does, to a particular community (who would otherwise for cultural and language reasons be excluded).

So the use of this story of Acts as pointing to the diaconate turns out to be correct after all. The Church, now as then, needs people full of the Spirit and of wisdom to organise the people of God for *diakonia* – a task given to all the followers of Christ.

Prayer (adapted from prayers of the Association for Episcopal Deacons)

Lord, we thank you for this community and land in which we do diakonia,
Despite the sickness and brokenness around us,
give us the courage to see and work toward your new creation,
in everything we encounter.

Heavenly Father, whose blessed Son came not to be served but to serve:
bless all who, following in his steps, give themselves to the service of others;
that with wisdom, patience, and courage,
we may minister in his Name to the suffering, the friendless, and the needy.
In the love of him who laid down his life for us,
your Son our Savior Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Word and social media

Last week the news world was rocked by Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen's exposure of its callous manipulation of human psychology to make money, whatever harm it was doing to people or society.

Christianity is a religion that takes communication seriously. How could it not when its Lord and Saviour is called the Logos – the meaningful rational Word? How could it not when two key words in its lectionary are preaching and teaching ("*kerygma*" and "*didache*"). And that communication has to be true for this God is the "God of truth" (Psalm 31:5) and Jesus describes himself as "the Truth" (John 14:6).

Currently there is a world crisis in popular communication brought about by the amazing technical achievement of the Internet which has enabled human communication to happen on a massive and fantastically fast scale. It seemed initially a dream come true, a world brought much closer together in unity and mutual understanding. Unfortunately the dream is becoming, has already become, a nightmare.

There has always been an assault on truth in various forms. Outright lies – and to use modern terminology – **misinformation** (incorrect information but which the sender thought was true), **disinformation** (information which the sender knows to be untrue), **malinformation** (false information designed to cause direct harm).

What is concerning is that there is now overwhelming evidence that the social media, the most prominent of which are Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram (all owned by one firm and man) and Twitter, communicate falsity and untruth far more effectively and speedily than truth.

Given the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of the social media to provide accurate, truthful information would have seemed obvious. The opposite has been the case. A rigorous scientific study by the University of Cape Town on vaccine information in South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Nigeria and Tanzania found this:

Anti-vaccination propaganda (21%)

Vaccine sceptics (20%)

Vaccine hesitant (35%)

Neutral information (10%)

Pro-vaccination material (13%)

So over three-quarters of the information was mis-, dis- or mal-information about a matter of life and death. Most of the false information came from South Africa.

How does it happen that these social media spread false news faster than factual information?

It all starts with the algorithms that are used to analyse all the words and key phrases in the messages you make on social media (except for a few such as Signal, which don't). A computer algorithm is simply a sequence of instructions. These algorithms enable your key words to be categorised and added to the personal profile they build up on you (and which is also linked to the profiles of all your contacts). That profile can then be used to direct appropriate advertising to the social media and websites you look at. So, for example, if you often message about clothing, you will end up seeing more and more adverts about clothing and fashionware. It is called targeted advertising. So far, fairly morally neutral. Facebook, Google Mail and YouTube set up "free" services (and in many ways most useful ones) as a way of building a database to sell to advertisers (and sometimes to politicians and lobbyists). You pay for that service by having to watch adverts.

It is at the next stage that the real trouble starts. The more adverts you get to look at the better for the advertiser and the better for the social media that sell the advertising space. So the trick is to ensure that people spend as much time on the social media as possible and move as fast as possible from one item to the next. You are likely to do that if you already have engaged with that sort of content, it is already being discussed by your friends on social media, conforms to you biases, grievances, insecurities, is emotive and makes you outraged, angry or envious. So the way the algorithm works out is to provide "click bait" to keep you engaged and the inevitable effect of following that "click bait" is to become encased in a "confirmation bias bubble" that usually ends up encouraging our worst attitudes and feelings and insecurities. Research revealed in recent weeks has shown the devastating toxic impact Instagram has had on teenage girls and boys. Facebook's own secret research found that 32% of girls and 14% of boys who felt bad about the bodies, said that Instagram made them feel worse and on average about 10% of youth reported suicidal thoughts.

A further factor that makes things worse is that because the aim of these media is rapid movement, pieces tend to be short, untaxing on the mind, with no incentive to read about qualifications, nuances or criticism and alternative views or to have facts checked.

The final issue is why have the social media not used their immense technical capability to fix at least some of these problems? The reason is simple and horrific. They want to keep making bigger and bigger profits.

What are our options? We can get off the social media entirely (the ascetic option) or only use those that are not tied to the advertising cesspit (such as the app called Signal). Or we can use them with extreme caution, always being alert for mis- and dis-information (and correcting such false information when you get it from friends' posts), or on the macro-scale, work for a society in which riches and profit are not the major drivers and in which social media would be public utilities.

Prayer (based on Ezekiel 28:1-19)

Lord, in these days of so much untruth,
the words of your prophet Ezekiel remind us of why we lost Eden,
how in the abundance of our trade, we were filled with violence and greed
and lost the garden of delight.

We acknowledge the indictment against us and our great men:

“Because your heart is proud and you have said, ‘I am a god;
I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas’,
yet you are but a mortal, and no god, though you compare your mind with
the mind of a god.

You are indeed wiser than Daniel; no secret is hidden from you;
by your wisdom and your understanding you have amassed wealth for
yourself,
and have gathered gold and silver into your treasuries.

By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your wealth, and your
heart has become proud in your wealth.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God: Because you compare your mind with
the mind of a god,
therefore, I will bring strangers against you, the most terrible of the
nations;
they shall draw their swords against the beauty of your wisdom and defile
your splendour.”

Lord, forgive us, and bring us back to the simplicity of the garden.

Christ the king

Kings do not have a very good press these days. Either they are depicted as traditionalist and authoritarian hindrances to the onwards march of democracy (as in Swaziland) or as the last vestiges of an inbred and redundant aristocracy, useless except for filling the pages of the mass media with celebrity scandals (as in England). What then do we make, today, of the idea of Christ the King (the feast of which was celebrated on Sunday)?

Some guidance may come from looking at the passage in John's Gospel (18: 33-38) in which the question of whether Jesus is a king is debated between Pontius Pilate, the Roman overlord of the subject state of Judah, and Jesus, the carpenter and itinerant preacher arrested by the Jewish religious authorities and handed over to Pilate for trial and execution as a rebel and pretender to the throne of Judah.

Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him

"Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus answered,

"Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"

Pilate answered,

"Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?"

Jesus answered,

"My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world."

Pilate said to him, "So you *are* a king?"

Jesus answered,

"You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice."

Pilate said to him:

"What is truth?"

It is unlikely that Pilate had sympathy for Jesus or that he was even trying to be fair – we know that Pilate, as with most Roman governors, was ruthless and cruel and had no scruples about crucifying rebels *en mass*. But no doubt he wanted to know what kind of rebel Jesus was or whether he was simply the scapegoat for some religious quarrel.

First Pilate asked Jesus whether he was "king of the Jews", in other words, "are you a political rebel, a pretender to the throne, who wants to oust the Romans and regain independence." Jesus, in reply seems to ask Pilate whether he seriously believes this accusation or has merely been told this by others. Jesus does not say Yes or No because he is challenging the very concept of kingship that Pilate is using.

Pilate, clearly not used to being questioned by a prisoner, curtly states that the Jewish authorities are the ones that have handed him over as a rebel (and they should know). He wants Jesus to tell him what he has actually done (to be arrested).

Again, Jesus does not respond as Pilate expects. He does not detail what he has done – preaching and teaching, healing the sick, debating with his religious adversaries, leading a symbolic march into Jerusalem. Would Pilate have even bothered to listen? Instead he goes to the crux of the matter.

Jesus states that his kingship is of a totally different order or dimension to the world within which Pilate moves. Because it is of a different order, he will not behave like a worldly king and his followers will not fight.

Pilate still does not comprehend and sees Jesus as having made an admission. “So you *are* a king?” It is this incomprehension which makes it inevitable that Pilate will eventually send Jesus to the cross, ostensibly as a rebel king.

In understanding this interchange it is important to understand the various meanings of the word “world” used in English translations. The Greek word translated as “world” in this passage is “kosmos”. It does not really correspond to what we usually mean by world – that is, the everyday visible reality on planet earth. Rather the Greek word describes an order, a system. Pilate’s world, his *kosmos*, is the prevailing political, economic and spiritual world order that controls and influences the lives of people. The popular magazine *Cosmopolitan* uses this term in its title and gives a good sense of its meaning as it encourages its readers to be citizens of a *kosmos*, a world order, based upon commercialism, greed, selfishness, the superficial and the transient.

So when Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world, this *kosmos*, he is not saying that his kingdom has nothing to do with this earth and is purely spiritual or supernatural. Rather, he is saying that he is not part of a world order characterised by the Roman rulers’ idolatry of power and their economy of imperial exploitation and cruelty or by the corruption and hypocrisy of the Jewish religious authorities in their puppet state. Jesus, and his followers belong to a different *kosmos* – they live in a different world order and they live a different way of life.

And this life, this particular world order, is one characterised by truth. “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.”

So when Christians acclaim Christ as King, they are giving their allegiance to the *kosmos* of truth, of reality. That is the world order they belong to, though much of their daily experience will be of a different *kosmos*, a system in which greed and self indulgence and abuse of power reign.

If they hear the voice of the master, the witness to the truth, they will be of the truth. They will hold steadfastly to a different reality, to the divine *kosmos* or world order. They will speak the truth of things both public and private, political, economic, religious, educational, personal. They will consider seriously and intelligently what their responsibilities are in a democratic society (of which they are the nominal rulers). They will not tolerate the use of the lie and the denial of reality (as for example in the denial

of the catastrophes of AIDS, Covid-19, a heating planet and the immiseration of absolute poverty while the super-rich get richer second by second). They will challenge the false gods and idols of our time, however popular and fashionable they may be, as well as the culture of selfishness and irresponsibility propagated in media and society. They will also seriously consider opting out of the secular Christmas carnival of greed and commercialism. And they will act on the truth, for they will also recognise that truth is active: it has to be done, witness has to be visible.

Jesus said: "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice."

Prayer

Almighty God, El Emeth, the God of truth:

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long. (Psalm 24:4-5)

O send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling. (Psalm 43:3)

Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord God of truth. (Psalm 31:5)

Living with Covid

Monday last week, day 620 of Lockdown, and, as Job is reputed to have said, “For the *pachad* (terror) which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I dreaded is come unto me” – the virus got me. So now I am coming to terms with having that external dread thing, that djinn, inside of me and hoping, if not to fully domesticate it, at least to come to some sort of truce.

I should have seen it coming.

Dr John Campbell, a nurse and nurse educator, is probably the best regular source of YouTube updates on the pandemic and what is particularly good is that he looks at information from the whole world, not just Europe and North America. Well, that very weekend, talking about the new Omicron variant, he said to his viewers, “You and I are going to get this.”

This needs some explanation, particularly in an era when even scientists lose their minds and start anthropomorphising genes and viruses. Viruses are not even alive. They do not plan, scheme, have selfish motives or even move. A virus is a little bit of detached protein that, if it is blown onto a suitable living cell, interacts chemically with that cell, is replicated several times and in so doing kills the cell. The common cold is a virus that has been with us for probably thousands of years. We have come to some sort of truce with it (sorry, I am anthropomorphising). It has mutated, and is constantly mutating, into a form that we cannot really defend ourselves against but it doesn't do so much damage that it kills us. There is a kind of balancing act here. Too dangerous, too damaging, and the host dies – no more transmission. Ebola in West Africa is a good example – it is deadly but it doesn't spread easily. Campbell's point was that the Omicron variant shows that the virus is entering the rapid mutation stage, greater contagion, but less deadly. But that also means that it, like the common cold, is now going to get us all.

Now for the good news. At the beginning of lockdown the information was that Covid was deadly. I remember the first time I went out (I had to get medication from the chemist) I wore a mask and gloves and when I came home I got into the shower in my clothes. Now many people are vaccinated. Although the Omicron variant can still infect a vaccinated person, the vaccination provides a good degree of protection from serious illness. I am over the worst (I hope) after only four days. I had a splitting headache and a high temperature for a day and a half. It is like a very bad head cold but it hasn't gone to my chest. The sense of assurance that the vaccination would help calmed anxiety.

The bad news is that, because of the rich world's moral imbecility in not seeing that everybody in the world needed to be vaccinated and the anti-vaxers' and vaccine hesitators' stupidity, there is a massive pool of unvaccinated people out there in whose bodies the virus can continue mutating and thereby make vaccines less and less effective.

As before, with the lobbying of big business, and particularly the marketers of alcohol, pressurising a weak government not to institute more sensible lockdown regulations, the onus is on us to protect ourselves as best we can. For churches, on principle unwilling to exclude anyone, working out how to minister to the stubbornly unvaccinated will become a major ethical crisis.

Christianity has had two thousand years to contemplate the meaning of evil and disease and death in what it affirms to be a good creation. It has sometimes fallen into legalistic explanations of this suggesting that disasters are punishments but this has never made much sense. The pandemic has no great inner meaning that we need to uncover or decipher. It is part of the kosmos we live in. The gospel message is that God entered this kosmos to liberate and save, to rescue us from the absurdity of sin and death. We are permitted to be angry about and to hate sin and death. St Augustine put it well when he said that Hope had two daughters, Anger and Courage. We have to be increasingly angry and we have to be increasingly courageous. We hope for a new world, the world of Revelation 21:1-5.

Prayer (Shrine of St Anthony of Padua)

Loving God, Your Son, Jesus Christ, travelled through towns and villages “curing every disease and illness.” At His command the sick were made well.

Come to our aid now, God of all life.

Heal those who are sick with the virus. May they regain their strength and health.

Be with those who have died from the virus. Be with the families of those who are sick or have died. Defend them from illness and despair.

Be with the doctors, nurses, researchers, first responders, essential workers, and all who seek to heal, serve, and help those affected. May they know your protection and peace.

Be with the leaders of all nations. Give them the foresight to act with charity and true concern.

Jesus Christ, stay with us. In place of our anxiety, give us your peace, comfort, and love.

Gentle and Loving God, heal us and come to our aid.

Amen

Mourners and the meek

For three weeks now we have been seeing scenes of death and destruction in the Ukraine. We see civilians caught up in the conflict mourning the dead and millions of the meek in refugee columns escaping the war. It is not that this is something new. We have seen many invasions and bombings of countries in recent decades – Afghanistan, Iraq, the former Yugoslavia and conflicts over and within territories – Palestine, the Congo, Libya, Yemen, Ethiopia.

Is there solace for the afflicted people in what Jesus said?:

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

I am sure there is, but what those words mean to the onlookers of these disasters, such as ourselves, may be more complicated.

We want to be blessed. We all do.

But maybe we need to fear that we won't – because we may not be “poor in spirit” or mourning properly, or meek and so our children won't inherit the earth.

It is a justifiable fear for it is people who Jesus says are going to be blessed. People who behave in a certain way. And are we people who actually behave in that way?

What kind of person is a person who mourns? What kind of a person is meek?

I say person deliberately – for it is a whole person who behaves in a certain way. For these descriptions of mourning and meekness are not just about inner attitudes, they are about what each of us does as a person – in thought, word and deed.

There has often been a danger of the beatitudes (in Matthew 5:1-7) being seen as far too difficult to live in practice – so they are “spiritualised” into an inner attitude that does not have to be exhibited in real life activity.

If one looks at Luke's rendition of these beatitudes (Luke 6:20-21, 24-25) it is very clear that this is about visible situations and overt behaviour:

“How blissful the destitute, for yours is the Kingdom of God; How blissful those who are now hungry, for you shall feast; how blissful those now weeping, for you shall laugh; ...
But alas for you who are rich, for you have your comfort. Alas for you who are now replete, for you will be hungry. Alas for those now laughing, for you will mourn and lament.”

So here are some thoughts on mourning and meekness.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

We cannot help the world in its sin and suffering unless we have a full sense of our share in the sin of the world and take a share of the suffering. We have to be open to allowing others to interfere with our nicely-planned and comfortable mode of life.

And we cannot be in the company of those that mourn if we have not the beatitude of meekness, of humility. We must be willing to reverence the others (but not be sentimental about them). You are your brother’s keeper. We do, normally, want to mourn and share in the sufferings of those we love. But those we are asked to love are now multitudinous through Christ.

There is so much to mourn in the world today. The examples are endless – the destruction, the misery of people in South Africa through inadequate education and poverty in this the most unequal society in the world, the corruption of people through the materialism of world society, and then the sufferings of the pandemic and war. But Jesus promises aid to the mourners. Indeed the word translated as “comfort” (we tend to think of as soft solace) originally meant “to strengthen much” and was even used of forcing soldiers into battle.

Being able to mourn with the mourners requires empathy, being able to share in what others feel. But by itself empathy is not enough – it can burn itself out if it is not accompanied by the positive attitude and action of compassion – of helping, of aiding, of acting.

“Blessed are the meek”

Jesus says to me and to you: Be meek and you will be blessed.

But what does being ‘meek’ mean?

Well, unfortunately, the word “meek” in modern English is a rather negative and derogatory term. We say that somebody was meek and refused to stand up for themselves. Meekness doesn’t appear to have a high place in our society. It has connotations of a meek person being weak and cowardly, either physically, or mentally, or both! Hardly people likely to inherit the earth – that’s going to be the assertive and the grabbers and invaders!

So what does Matthew’s gospel mean by “the meek”.

Well, in the broad sense of a class of people it could mean what the Old Testament calls the “poor of the land”. As the prophet Amos 8:4 puts it: “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land.” It is Luke’s “the destitute”. It is the opposite class of people to those I saw at a conference I was at last week where some wore labels “VIP” and “VVIP” – the very important people and the very, very important people.

The Greek word for the “meek” (praüs) comes from a term indicating the behaviour of a trained war-horse – strong and powerful but tame and well-controlled.

Yes, Jesus wants us to work powerfully under his guidance (Matthew 11:28-30):

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am **meek** and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

So the Lord whose yoke is light is himself “meek”. Yet Jesus is hardly a pushover. He is hardly submissive or weak, he who can call King Herod “that fox” and whip traders out of the Temple.

Indeed it is interesting the word “meek” also appears in the description of the protest march into Jerusalem that we name Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:2-5), with Jesus

“saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

‘Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
meek, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

So to be meek we have to be gentle, self-controlled, actively working under God’s direction. A meek person has steady courage without recklessness. To be meek means not becoming embittered or angry however much the provocation by an enemy or oppressor. It is strength under control, exercised in humility. It is an active attitude that is accepting of difficulties and limitations. A meek person does the right thing at the right time, with the right people, in the right way. That person takes the long view, lives in the present and leaves the future to God. If that person is in a dominant position or is temperamentally assertive or even aggressive, that must be transformed into humble service.

This way of living is communicated in the words of Psalm 37:1-11.

Prayer (Psalm 37:1-11)

Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.

Trust in the Lord, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him, and he will act.
He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret – it leads only to evil.
For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.
But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight in abundant prosperity.

End of the disaster?

It was 739 days ago that the silence of the first day of the Corona-virus lockdown surrounded us. Now, this evening, the State President informed us that the official State of Disaster ends at midnight. So we return to some kind of normality, though the pandemic is far from over, particularly in some countries experiencing the highest number of infections ever, though the virus is no longer as deadly. All our lives have changed but humanity has survived.

As we come to the end of the lockdown, it may be time to reflect on what we learned, or could have learned, or might have learned, from this time of disaster, now balefully illuminated by another disaster, the war in the Ukraine.

A first caveat, when thinking about lessons learned, is to say that the pandemic disaster, huge as it was – over 6 million dead worldwide, 300 thousand in South Africa – does not teach us anything we did not already know about the visible universe we inhabit. It seems provocative to say that – but people die of diseases every day, families are wrecked by car accidents, innocents are gunned down, prisoners tortured, poor people starve, rulers and leaders act without consideration for their people.

The pandemic was not some uniquely terrible event any more than the current European war is (it is advisable to bear in mind that wars are going on at the moment in Yemen, Syria, Ethiopia, Libya and the Congo, and that countries bombing and invading others is not that unusual, exemplified in the number of countries that the United States of America has done this to over the last seventy-five years¹). So it can be repeated – the pandemic, simply by being a big, rather than a small disaster, does not tell us anything new about the world.

In a way this is very disconcerting. We want great events, however terrible, to have some meaning. We want to blame somebody or see some guiding hand behind disasters like this. Over the last two years we have heard many people arguing that somehow the disaster was part of God's plan or that it was a quite specific punishment for bad human behaviour, or for the more paranoid conspiracy theorists, that the pandemic was caused by some malign and devilish force. These misapprehensions have a picture of God that is totally anthropomorphic. God is just like a big god Zeus with a limited, human-scale, personality, who occasionally pushes the pawns (that's us) on the chessboard of the finite universe.

¹ China 1945-46; Korea 1950-53; Guatemala 1954, 1960, 1967-69; Indonesia 1958; Cuba 1959-1961; Vietnam 1961-73; Congo 1964; Peru 1965; Laos 1964-73; Dominican Republic 1965-66; Cambodia 1969-70; El Salvador 1980s; Nicaragua 1980s; Grenada 1983; Lebanon 1983, 1984; Libya 1986, 1981, 2011-; Iran 1987-88, 1998, 2020; Panama 1989; Kuwait 1991; Iraq 1991-2000s, 2015-; Somalia 1993-94, 2007-08, 2010-; Bosnia 1994, 1995; Sudan 1998; Afghanistan 1998, 2001-2021; Serbia 1999; Yemen 2002, 2009-; Pakistan 2003, 2006-; Syria 2014-

That is not the Christian (or indeed any of the great religions') conception of God. God is not a piece, even a large and powerfully acting piece, of this universe. God is the creator of the universe and any attempts to understand God from our finite human experience are doomed to failure. We simply do not have infinite wisdom – so well expressed in the book of Job chapters 38 and 39.

So what does one say in response to the pandemic? Christianity has had 20 centuries to reflect on what evil, sin and death mean. And the essential answer is that it is a mystery that cannot be explained away as being part of a perfectly planned world history, or a well-judged handing out of rewards, miraculous escapes or punishments to people or nations. Indeed suffering and death don't have any easily explained meaning at all. They are the horrible side effects of a world that endures an ancient alienation from God and is enslaved to spiritual and worldly powers hostile to God. The answer to the mystery of death and sin and innocent suffering is not through some attempt to rationalise it, but to look at the counter mystery of the empty tomb and the 'gardener' speaking to a weeping Mary outside that tomb on Easter morning – showing God's victory over evil, sin and death.

This is not to say that we cannot learn from what has happened, and from how people and nations responded.

- Pandemics arise because growing human populations pack food animals into unhealthy containment and invade ecosystems they shouldn't interfere with and there are virus cross-overs from their normal hosts into human bodies with deadly effect. So we can learn that we need to treat the environment with greater respect.
- Although most governments in the world did put the lives of their citizens first – which was the reason for having lockdowns in the first place, it soon became apparent that the idea that this would be a new start to a much more caring and responsible world order soon withered as the captains of capitalism insisted that the economy and profits came first and the corrupt continued in business. So the false god of ever increasing growth is back on the throne. The idea of looking at a longer term future of society has waned as industrial pollution reverts back to its pre-pandemic level. The lobbyists of the fossil fuel industry are back on the road making use of the short term shortages caused by the war in the Ukraine – regardless of the longer term threat of disastrous climate change.
- If there is one thing the pandemic should have taught us, or at least reminded us of, is that human beings have a consistent track record of messing things up and that, whatever the temporary victories (such as the defeat of Nazism in the mid-20th century or of apartheid thirty years ago), there will always be new challenges and struggles for new generations. South Africa and the Church in South Africa undoubtedly lost the plot after the mid-1990s and we have to regain the awakensness that true faith demands (Ephesians 5:14; Luke 21:36). Often, after a disaster, there is a chorus of "Never agains!". Yet few countries were prepared for the pandemic and the proliferation of anti-democratic populist politicians in the last decade showed the shallowness of our post-Second World War determination to resist all totalitarianism.

- But love, bravery and endurance were there too during the more than two years of lockdown. It was shown most dramatically by health personnel, particularly nurses and people distributing food to the poor and unserved. People cared about others. People also endured, they restricted what they did, wore masks and all, because they put the lives and welfare of others before their own. It is well to recollect that one of the reasons that the early Christians converted the Mediterranean world was that when they experienced the pandemics of that time, they cared for and nursed all. They did not have better knowledge or medicines – but they cared for the sick and dying – and made a huge difference as to who survived. We thank all those who helped us survive the pandemic.

Some 738 days ago I wrote the first of these lockdown homilies, as a support to my local parish church members. I never thought that I would continue writing, daily for two hundred days and then more irregularly to produce nearly another hundred. It has been both a heavy discipline and a joy. And I would like to thank those readers who sent in comments and messages. May you all be blessed.

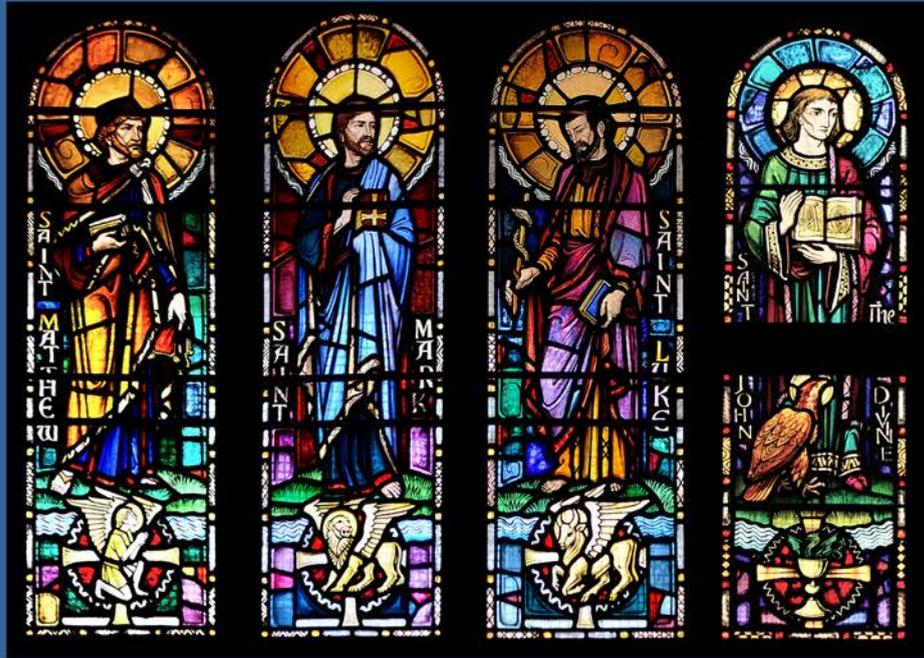
Prayer

Lord, we have come through this disaster,
But we bear the wounds of these years
And the scars remain with us and with our children.
So we pray for the healing of ourselves and the nations.

Grant us the grace to show love in a world that remains in turmoil
Afflicted by wars and human poverty and misery.
May your Holy Spirit awaken us and keep us awake,
always aware of the ongoing struggle against sin, evil and death.
Keep us in the truth, open to the truth, willing to work to know the truth,
willing to stand bravely for the truth in all circumstances.

May we take hope in the visionary picture in Revelation 22.
May we continue to trust that you will heal us and the nations.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.



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