

## Life in abundance

*I have come that you may have life in abundance – Jn.10.10 – that you enjoy life.*

Why is this special? Life needs a focus as well as a purpose if I am to experience abundant living. Jesus tells us he has come so that we might enjoy life. What is noteworthy about his teaching is how little attention he pays to sin; he never ignores it – tells Magdalen *neither to I condemn you, sin no more – Jn.8.11*. But his focus is always on freedom – *he came to his people to set them free – Lk.1.68*. He never says *stop sinning and you will be free, rather be free and you will not sin*.

I believe [I can't prove it] there was a purpose behind me being created; that none of us are simply the result of random choice on God's part. I believe my life has meaning, but what is it and how can I find it? The key is actually in life itself – my life from one *now* to the next *now*. My life actually happens now – not yesterday when it did, not tomorrow when it will – but now, when it does. Which is why Scripture identifies our starting point when it says *now is the acceptable time – 2Cor.6.2*.

S Bonaventure uses the word *illumination* to help us on our way – by which he means not simply light – as at the end of the tunnel – but a *warmth* issuing from something smouldering within – as embers in a grate – we are enlightened from within, not from outside. *God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us – Rom.5.5*. We are not attracted by light from a distant beacon, but warmed to glowing by fire within to seek my heart's desire; and in doing so discover something extra – I am not simply seeking light, but becoming light for others – *the Spirit is alive and active cutting more finely than a two-edged sword – Heb.4.12*.

One major change resulting from this is a move away from *what I have done and what I have failed to do*, to focus on what being a fully alive human being means. What is real?

*What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"*

*"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real."*

*"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.*

*"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are real you don't mind being hurt."*

*"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"*

*"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."*

Margery Williams [Velveteen Rabbit]

*Real* cannot be the same for everyone – not even always the same for me, it varies with circumstances, moods etc. Whether I am a believer or an avowed agnostic, I see reality through the way I am actually living – or refuse to see! We have the help of so many who have trod their path before us on this same quest. For the believer this is particularly true of Scripture, if we look at it more from the alluring of the promise of abundant life, in the same way that motivated people into getting up and moving out in their searching. Focus on more to do with *what excited* them rather than what they did – *why*, rather than *what*.

A major part of Scripture is made up of stories, people struggling to find purpose and meaning in life. It is the paradox of Jesus-crucified who says he brings this life in abundance. Gleaned from these stories it is evident that whatever the price involved in searching for this life, it is a price worth paying – truly the heart's desire. It is crucial because it makes real the promise that we become aware of God as nothing other than total, self-emptying love. Life in abundance is experiencing *loving, being loved in the mutuality of the two*. It makes real God as Father, Son and Spirit.

I am worthwhile because I came into being because God desires to be with me. What matters is not so much that I believe in God but that God believes in me! My sin is not sin because it offends God, God cannot be changed by sin, it is sin because *it denigrates and abuses what God loves – me!* In searching for this true meaning I should not concentrate overly on systems, methods and exercises – the *practice makes perfect* thinking – in case I believe I can arrive at spiritual maturity through the apprenticeship method – stay with it and it will come good.

It is not methods, systems or disciplines that make me spiritual; it is being spiritual that gives value to personal effort – *spirituality is not about what I do, but who I am – For you didn't receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, Abba Father – Rom.8.15.* There is, at times a temptation for a kind of pseudo Gnosticism to creep in – *I know the way and I'll show you* – suggesting a mastering of a kind of expertise, like knowing the great traditions, and being familiar with different methods of prayer.

Such elitism is not found in the Gospel, where we hear a call to holiness that is universal, and so must be universally possible and available. Spirituality is not an add-on to everyday living; it is when we experience the freedom sheer goodness life brings, with a sense that there is *an even deeper* experience of this. We often, unfortunately, abandon homely, everyday language when we go into holy mode, and use such words as *saved, redeemed, rescued, healed* – like after a visit to the doctor! It is *rescue language*, and spirituality is not about being rescued.

I go to the surgery when something is wrong with me, to have something done for me by the application of skill, something I can't do for myself – the healing comes from *outside* myself. Is this how I see my spiritual life, like the Red Cross – a wonderful rescue agency? Time for a re-think. Health is not something tacked-onto me. My health is the harmonious [or otherwise] working of me within myself. Likewise, the abundant life promised is an intensity of experience of being fully alive, from deep down within.

No one can bestow health, happiness or love upon me. Such qualities are fashioned within and consequent to my *forma vitae* – the *shape* of my life. Fault and enjoyment are fruits from my inner living and working. Jesus promises life in abundance – not as a gift from beyond – but as something uncovered through the presence of the Spirit *poured into our hearts* – Rom.5.5. When I begin to *feel* [not just know] the goodness God sees in me. Growth in the spiritual life, attraction towards abundance happens because of the promised *something more* – Heb.11.40, and what the poet expresses: *Crying what I do is me, for this I came... acts in God's eyes what in God's eyes he is* – GMH Kingfishers. No doctor, no rescue service can live this for me.

This is why our first value [not valuables] is self-value. There never has been, nor ever will be anyone who can make God present like I/you can. To insist on being individual and independent, wrongly understood, has serious consequences – leading to the *save my soul* mentality, within a faith that believes in the resurrection of the body. I must start away from myself – I belong to the world, the world to the cosmos etc. before ever I focus on myself. I need *to see* reality, and not simply what I make of it.

Cosmos is held together by a complex network of relationships which allow the earth to be what it is. The material that makes up my body began as star-dust, and spun out aeons ago – and will return there: *ashes to ashes, dust to dust*. Thus far the cosmos has proved itself to be a furnace of creativity, inexhaustible in producing ever new wonders – including us! How misguided, and even arrogant, to ignore all this for the sake of focusing on my own individuality.

If I would know what *human* means I need to start from where human starts – Creator God, and hear that this is the image in which we are created. The mystery of me is at the heart of the why of creation. Is all that there just because of me, or is there not a real and necessary relationship between Creator and Creation as a whole? Wonderful as it is to be a genuine human being, we must never forget where we come from as well as where we are going. All the while being mindful of the fact that what we see as real is conditioned by my experience of being alive.

How I experience what I see as real, shapes how I will speak and relate to God – conversely, how I perceive God influences how I live and relate. This is why we need to be open to hear what creation has to say about where it came from, God – the awesome vastness of creation and the helpless child clinging to a human breast! God comes into our world as someone needing to be loved and cared for. Creator chooses to be part of creation.

Tradition, however, shows our beginning [Genesis] as a sorry tale of betrayal and failure, with a curse that affects us still... so much so that all we can do is cry-out for help. Are we in a position of weakness or strength as regards God? Tradition would have it that it is weakness – seeing human weakness clamped within the realm of death; our bodily existence, if not kept in check, will fatally infect our souls. This is what happens when we start from Original Sin. We live in bodies prone to selfishness and sin; we need to discipline our waywardness – life is to be tamed, denied and finally left behind!

The story of the fall is neither the opening nor the central theme of Genesis. Before ever there is Original Sin there is Original Grace. Genesis opens with God consistently affirming creation – *and God saw that it was very good*. God's invitation to Adam and Eve is to enjoy life in a garden of delight; with the earth sustaining life and with the dust of the earth destined to become the body of God. Life began in harmony with God, who walked with them in the cool of the evening; for to be human is to be of God and of the earth simultaneously.

This was ruptured by the free choice of sin; but the fall is, in reality, a sub-plot which derives its meaning from the full story of Creation [the natural world is untouched by sin – but abused by sinners]. The full story focuses on the promise of the human return to living in harmony with God; so that instead of describing life as a war against sin, Scripture speaks of the human struggle for goodness. Scripture will not let us base our spiritual life on sin, Original or otherwise.

*Creation theology* insists on the way God sees creation: *and God saw that it was good*. Creation is God-related and God-revealing, a relationship that cannot be destroyed – it has been neglected, forgotten and defaced, but it cannot be destroyed. Looking back over life we have much to regret – but our past is in the best possible place, in God's hands – who is mercy, forgiveness and compassion. In recalling *what I have done and what I have failed to do*, this should be underscored with thanksgiving, not just regret. Because I'm no longer a sinner, but a forgiven sinner.

The fact that I needed to be forgiven along with no demand from God that I repent – that should come from me – slowly allows me to recover my self-respect; since I am loved, desired and cherished by God just me, as I am. Allowing this to seep through removes the icy chill left by selfishness, and alerts me to the abundance waiting on me. Freedom is the most cherished gift, the very foundation of loving and being loved – but I can choose wrongly as well as right. However, love assures me that provided I am honest [as a way of life] I may not be right but I will not be wrong. Love can never be demanded as a price for anything – love is only real when freely given and received.

God never gives up on me, freedom promises that I always have the chance to say yes: *For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!" And through Christ, our "Amen" (which means "Yes") ascends to God for his glory – 2Cor.1.20*. Jesus is God's yes to me. My freely chosen yes to this is the reason why there is joy over a repentant sinner.

Religion's main concern for me should be about the values that shape my life. Life is never *still-life*, not just an abstract idea. We are inserted within relationships which are continually being shaped and re-shaped, enlarged and diminished, through the choices we freely make. Each choice is from a series of possibles, my choosing this rather than that will show me where my heart is. Values do not have equal importance – some are more so than others, there is a hierarchy of values within us. Where did it come from?

This where religion can help establish my value system; and at the heart of it there will be one value above all others – *my heart's desire*, whatever that turns out to be – it is the *pearl of great price*. This why I need to distinguish between value and valuables. Valuables – money, status, property, and reputation... are all external, seen as valuable because they enhance life. Whereas value is internal, at the level of passion-for, the result of certain experiences.

When we seriously reflect on issues like terminal illness, family break-up we find that we don't define ourselves by externals, rather by our capacity for meaning, purpose, love and companionship. In other words, striving for value is reaching out for self-value in a world shot through with potential relationships – a world beyond us, yet within reach.

The initial impact of being in love, is on the lover; something happens so that I find *this is who I am because of your impact on me*. The same happens in the one loved, as if confirming what the Gospel affirms *it is only in losing yourself you will find yourself* – Mt.10.39, and so begins the awareness that abundant living is within reach. Abundance is possible because of this one value being sought above all others – *you are my heart's delight!* Many speak of this as God, as if we must forsake all else for a face-to-face with God.

How does God reach me? Change the word *God* for love. How does love reach me? It is through so many other loves that we are led to love itself – without any diminishment. Francis in seeing beautiful things saw beauty itself. For some there is a such a direct route to God who alone is their heart's desire – a very different experience from saying this is what it should be! For the majority of others, we go to God in whatever way God sends love our way.

Scripture warns us against investing ourselves in possessions – which can be gained or lost [they are not wrong – God made them – but they are never enough]. We need life-enriching relationships – our abundance is in our relating, not in our possessing. What is happening in relating? I have the gift of life for this purpose alone. I am gifted with life – no one is self-starting – so as to become what I am receiving through my relating to enrich others – *you received without charge, give without charge* – Mt.10.8. Value never happens through making bad choices, or failing to make good ones – what matters is the *passion* in my searching. Life is to be lived so that this can happen.

Why is fidelity crucial? I am not faithful to something outside me – my primary fidelity is to my personal integrity. It is in struggling to honour my word that I become a whole [holy] person; able to be trusted and so able to make life together a real possibility. I am faithful or trying to be because, subconsciously, faith reveals the reality of love as an *experience* – not as an ideal. Living in faith lets me experience wholeness, believing in a love that is both big enough and small enough to embrace all of me, just as I am. This is another way of *experiencing* love - God believes in me! God loves the lovely – and that is how God sees me. How estranged we are from this is brought home to us when we use the expression: *he thinks he's God's gift to creation* as a put-down, when it is true of all of us!

*Abundance* is not a reward from God for being good. Genesis shows God calling the world into existence in an orderly fashion; so much so that after each stage we hear *and God saw that it was good*, and when we arrive *God saw that it was very good*. Am I not affected by a world that even causes God to wonder? I am offered the chance, through life itself, to open life up to goodness everywhere, that is what Creation means – where the goodness of God is to be found. This is why it is an obscenity to take part of creation and fashion weapons to be used to destroy other parts of the same creation – fratricide.

OT stories emphasise the energy we give to discovering the hidden goodness of creation. The hoped for outcome of all honest striving is to discover more and more the goodness waiting to be found. Whatever life and God are about, it is happening now – not in some future time, not even lost in time past – through the everyday choices we make because of seeking our heart's desire.

In OT God walks with them in the cool of evening. In NT we have God with skin – not *humanity* but flesh and blood presence, with needs and desires like ours. This can never be reversed or regretted – God is with us now, in every now. This didn't disappear with the death of Jesus. He has shown us that we can make the Lord present by the way we are present to each other, through the gift of the Spirit which he gives – *it is accomplished* – it is now possible to live a human life as God intended, through the same Spirit that enabled Jesus to do it. Who didn't come to show us how to escape from our bodies but how to inhabit them fully.

Ps.84 says: *how lovely is your dwelling place, Lord God* – instead of seeing this as what we say about God see it as what God says about us – *I will make of you my dwelling place* – Ezek.37.27, because it is a

lovely place to be. We are many other things as well as rational. Thinking is crucial for growth, but all our thinking issues from emotion. It is in my body that I meet the world; to stand freely in the presence of God, Jesus simply stood face-to-face with the world.

The parables contain an unlikely mix of characters, with seemingly little in common: a king, a farmer, a fisherman, a housewife... The main characters – who do not equal God - who establish the relevant aspect of daily living in which we can see the activity of God: with the farmer – care for his crops; a shepherd's care for his sheep and the housewife's concern for what is lost – it is *sheer ordinariness* that is the setting for the presence of God. Not that the farmer, shepherd or housewife is like God, but the qualities of care and compassion are godly, and possible for all of us.

The fruit of Grace is always, in some form, a heightened sensitivity to the needs of others. When such sensitivity is where love is then we should celebrate if it is unblemished; repair if it is broken and bring it with us if it is missing. What I bring to others is not task, but myself seeking to become there what I have been given myself – love, care, and compassion. I don't just need hands to reach out – but first of all the sensitivity to notice where reaching out is needed. In the parable of Dives and Lazarus, Dives is not evil – he just didn't notice!

The purpose of life's journey is not to arrive somewhere, but to enjoy the travelling, and help others do the same. No matter how ordinary life might be, everyone has a right to passion, fun and enjoyment. Jesus invited his first disciples to feel free to come and see for yourselves; there is no record of where they went or what they saw. Where they ended up doesn't matter – what matters is to accept the invitation. We know from NT that their lives were just like ours – they were moody, rowing and even betraying – this is the unlikely mix Jesus chose to spread the Good News – there is hope for all of us here! Having been chosen they didn't suddenly become heroic but, in choosing to follow him, they were better than they would have otherwise been in the sense a zest for life began to mature in them, because of being with him.

### **What is life for?**

We have ways of seeing reality, which has an impact on all levels of life. The problem with seeing life as a matter of body and soul, is that because the body is seen as less than permanent it was seen as *inferior* to soul – and seen by some as not necessary and problematic – what to do with it. One serious consequence of this was seeing the wonder and splendour of non-human creation merely as the back-drop for me saving my soul; denying any inherent value to creation itself – it's my play-pen. Once human history has run its course, the rest can be closed down.

Lack of world loyalty betrays Scripture, where God marvels at the wonder of creation before ever we arrive; paying no heed to the Word becoming flesh, when the very dust of earth becomes the body of God. As persons we are unique and separate, independent of human community – fictitious! True we are independent, but essentially inter-dependent. Without this we are doomed to a save your soul mentality. All socialising – family, friends and colleagues – are no more than a cosmetic convenience, at the end of the day it's me that matters.

Genuine quality living is shaped through relationships. Tradition has tended to oppose flesh and spirit; not just between me and my body but also in the world where we are *mourning and weeping in a valley of tears*, as Catholic piety proclaimed. The world we are led to disdain – in spite of: *God so loved the world that he sent his only Son* – Jn.3.16. There is an inevitable rigidity about codified morality. It is the spiritual quest that is vital; and even this has been reduced to a series of prohibitions. Where is the Good News summoning us to an ever more abundant life?

What is remarkable about human living is the integration of body, soul and spirit. The complexity of feelings and emotions that finds expression through the body, enabling us to become real. But what is it that gives meaning and purpose to all this? We choose all sorts of things, for all sorts of reasons – where is the underlying pattern that brings all together? Whilst it is reasonably straightforward to discern good from bad, what about good from good? What is the one purpose towards which all else is moving? What will my soul do differently once it is *saved*?

Whatever *salvation, heaven, kingdom...* mean, we do expect some kind of fulfilment to life. Would anything non-human satisfy? The Incarnation says that human fulfilment starts here and starts now, rooted in the ordinary of every day, where we learn the awesomeness of unending love as something that includes us, by way of the many flesh and blood loves that come our way, luring me out of selfishness into the wide-open loving Paul calls the Body of Christ.

Heaven, salvation are not things different from what we are accustomed to – never other and different, but simply more and deeper experiencing. It is not the abolition of life as we know it to make room for something bigger and better, but the love and joy *partially* experienced as yet, brought to completion. Perfect living is abundant living, not so much the best we can manage – this would still leave a hunger. What is promised is the reality of love and goodness as an unchangingly always new experience. Jesus didn't say *I've come to take you to heaven* – rather *I've come that you may enjoy living to the full* – Jn.10.10.

It is to be noted how the parables are about *more* life, so much so that even the cross is seen as evidence that the *abundance* of life is worth dying for; the Resurrection is life without end or any kind of diminishment. Jesus risen, simultaneously dead and fully alive, eats and drinks with his friends; comes and goes without restraint. This is not spirit experience, but a very much alive and embodied Jesus.

Such is the reality – but where is the evidence of it today? There is enough pain and injustice, heartbreak, abuse and unfairness to challenge any claim to fullness of life. We have suffered, and caused others to suffer, there is so much real hurting around to challenge anything Jesus has to say. In no way does Jesus turn his back on evil, or enter into compromise – but always seeks the goodness that can emerge from it; and when speaking of yeast, salt and mustard seed, invites us to join this *minority*, for the sake of the majority – seeking ever to turn evil into goodness. Access to eternal and brim-full living is being fully inserted into life as it is here and now.

There isn't just one world view. We see reality and relate to it through ways that make sense at any given time. There are differing world views with East and West Christians, Moslems, Buddhists... but what is *the* reality? In the West we tend to see reality *as things out there*, in various categories deemed to be useful or otherwise. We insist that humans are always subjects, not objects [things]. Sadly our behaviour does not live up to this; especially when we insist that systems come first – that my way is always right.

Our claim to holiness rests on our *subjectivity* – especially when it is recognised and respected. In the vastness of so many created [objects] *things*, there is a tiny cluster of subjects, unlike the rest of creation, the only part of creation able to be self-aware. Which also causes us to construct our own home when we feel excluded and irrelevant. With such a world view it is little wonder that spirituality became an alienation, living in a world where we do not belong. Waiting to leave it all behind.

There is an instinct in us which makes us uncomfortable with this – one that serves us well when faith is allowed to remind us that the Word became flesh, that flesh living is good enough for God, and this earth is where we are genuinely at home. Spirituality cannot be denial of the only life we know; designed and located specifically to bring us intimacy with God.

### **The alternative view**

Do we realise how much of our accepted language for speaking about God is not Scriptural language? Because of the prevailing world view of reality as a multiplicity of things, God had to be fitted into this somehow [instead of the reverse]. God became the *greatest thing, Supreme Being*, who exists independently and is without needs. This is how we coped with divine transcendence.

There was a price to pay! God is so great, has no need of anything, not even me! There is no limitation in the infinity of God. God is so full that nothing can be added, nothing taken away. God doesn't need me or my prayers! If all this is as true as philosophy insists, then I can give God nothing or do anything for God. Is it, then true that all our striving, our best efforts can do nothing at all?

Why does our instinct say no to this? Is it because I pray it is because I *need* to pray, and to believe my prayer has value? Scripture speaks to us long before theology, telling us we do matter to God – we make a

difference. I never pray to an unmoved mover, there is something in us that will not let us do this – and we are in the image of God. Once my heart is freed from the dictatorship of my head I will move away from self-doubt about worthiness, and relish an enthusiasm for commitment to become more than I am – not other than I am!

Scripture abounds with evidence of a caring God, who cares passionately. Far from being a world shunned by God – God is saying *how lovely is my dwelling place*. Because it is the done thing to use ordinary social language about God, does not make it the *only* language. There is a language in Scripture reserved for ritual celebrations – but for the ordinary of every day, my living and loving, my laughing and crying – Scripture language seemingly has no place.

However, Scripture claims to be relevant for *all* aspects of life in one simple sentence: *God is love* – 1Jn.4.8. Which we have all used, even for it to become somewhat repetitious. Is this because it doesn't signify real *experience* for us, simply information? It is a straightforward assertion – there is nothing else to God but love. If our origin and destiny is to experience love totally and personally, what is this saying about everything that owes its origin in the Word? Can I say with conviction: *God is love; and love only creates what is lovely; but God created me...!!!*

This seemingly chaotic mix called creation has something to say about God; and we are that part of creation gifted so as to receive this awareness, and en flesh it in such ways that *all* creation can praise God simply by our actively letting it be its self: *God is praised when we are fully alive*. The world will be what was always intended by the way it is lived-in.

What does it mean to say *I'm in love*? I belong, I am desired and the reason is *who you are for me*. We fashion ourselves through relationships – saying God is love is saying God is social, there is belonging in God. Relating is not something I do out of the goodness of my heart. It takes more than me to be in love – love that goes out and never returns is not love. Love cannot be either partially given or partially received. God can never give less than all, and can never exclude. To love is to be fascinated so much as to desire to be part of it.

We love because our freedom yearns for it – this what Jesus had in mind when he told us that he has come that we might enjoy life abundantly – Jn.10.10. If God is love – who am I made in this image? Before we drift off into euphoria, think of the implication. In the parable of the workers coming at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour and receiving the same pay as those who've laboured through the day's heat – do we not have a sense of unfairness? Yet, love is both total and universal, else it is not love – no such thing as *conditions apply!*

What is important in living are real values like rejoicing in love, crying in pain, grieving in death, forgiving when hurt... when any of these is real we never use abstract language – *because we are personally involved*: *I'm happy, sad etc*. Never *one* is happy! Ordinary language can be eminently personal – like moments of abuse when I find myself saying *I'm worth more than this!* But who is this "I"? Someone who strives, seeks, desires and suffers... forever seeking for the *not yet* in thick of the already.

Relationships tell me [and you] how I *feel* about my world, I'm not locked into cold rationality. To be is to be experiencing. My everyday feelings tell me how much [or little] I value my world. This kind of living is completely other than forever seeking to understand – the Lord doesn't ask us *do you understand*, but *do you believe?* Our devotion to rationality cuts us off from the rest of creation. The balanced thinkers – like Bonaventure and more recently, people like Whitehead – say that *reality* is linked in some experiential way.

Liking, loving, hating and the like do two things: they allow an appropriate response to feelings, and building-up a memory of experiences sufficiently influential to prevent us objectivising and neutralising. The only world I know is what experience fashions in me. This has nothing to do with rationalising but with the quality and intensity of feelings – we feel our way through life. The location of my self is my body, and the location of my body is the world.

The best of thinking, be it profoundly abstract or deeply spiritual, happens through my body-relationship with the world. My body is not just *in* the world; it *is* the world for me. Ask simply where does my body stop and my world begin? Is it the soles of my feet? What about the air I need, sunshine, food and drink? My

body is material shaped by the mysterious interchange between me and not me. There is affirmation of this in the Incarnation – the Word becomes flesh! In his flesh Jesus took the world as part of himself. The world became, in him, the body of God. Life in the world is life in God.

Life in the body is not *to get somewhere* but to enjoy – to discover what it means to be passionately involved. What made Francis cry-out *this is what I long for with all my heart* was his desire to say yes to his discovering creation and every single part of it: *do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be the “Yes, yes” and the “No, no?” But as God is faithful, our word toward you was not “Yes and no.” For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us, by me, Silvanus, and Timothy, was not “Yes and no,” but in him is “Yes.” For however many are the promises of God, in him is the “Yes.” Therefore, also through him is the “Amen”, to the glory of God through us – 2Cor.17-20.*

How misguided to regard the body as something inferior, or to brand passion as inappropriate – this misrepresents the Incarnation and fails to understand the resurrection. Jesus speaks of life *in abundance*, and the only life we know is flesh and blood living, sensual, feeling and loving. Spirituality is about *wholeness, integrity and commitment* which can only happen through the experiences we have of relationships. God is not *like* anything. Yet prophets and mystics speak of God in human relationship terms.

Prayer is one person *conversing/being with* another. Scripture speaks of God longing and desiring, pleading and forgiving – all of which involve a *not yet* element. If God desires me-accepting-salvation – there is a not yet about it happening; when God creates, God exists within this relationship which wasn't there before creation began.

If God wills something – that something makes a difference to God! Genesis portrays everything as personal – the whole creation is the building of what God loves in its totality. And Revelation tells us that this happens with Christ in mind. Our relating, loving and striving is how God is present in creation – establishing what is totally lovable, the Body of Christ; who, through our prayerful contact, feels our pain and pleasure and dies our death, because God is love.

### **Abundant life**

What was God doing before creation? Which is a non-question asked within the parameters of space and time, a reality that exists in neither. The only God we know is Creator God. For all specific activities we can ask why and what for – but if there is neither a why nor a what for, other than for itself alone, then we are facing the reality of love really and truly present.

Why do we *experience* instead of not experiencing? Indeed, before ever hitching our wagon to this or that theory about how it all began – ask rather *why is there something and not nothing* [even nothing is something!]? Which answers the question *what is love for?* Love is its own justification, never a means always and end. Love asks for a deeply personal self-forgetfulness through being with another. Get rid of the notion that love is selfless – love is essentially self-involved – all of me. When I embrace, I am embraced; when I kiss I am kissed.

The question to ask is how much of my self do I put into this self-giving? If it is what I long for with all my heart, it is all or nothing! The Gospel shows a link between abundance and loving – one is the fruit of the other. Which is why Jesus never says stop sinning and start loving, but start loving and there will be no sin – *much is forgiven her because she loves much* – Lk.7.47. Love is for nothing other than loving. Think of enjoying a meal; I go for what I like to taste much more than for nutritional content. I enjoy the feeling of warm sunshine, the company of special friends – I feel all this. The challenge for me to love God and neighbour can only be fulfilled by me; no one can do it for me.

The word the Gospel uses to describe life with God is not after-life, or heavenly life – it is Resurrection. What is striking about the Resurrection appearances is the emphasis on Jesus' flesh and blood presence – Thomas touches him, he eats with them – no hint of any kind of purely spirit-form presence. The self I am fashioning now is the only self available for risen life with God. We too will carry the wounds and scars of life, evidence of my trying to live my life.

Sin disfigures the lovely things we touch, while the Good News assures salvation through discovering that love can never be denied, which makes the end of life the beginning of life. The sin of the world is wherever life is shallow, starved and/or wounded. The dimension of life is co-terminus with my involvement with it. The Beatitudes speak of fullness, contentment now – not hereafter. God is not for salvation, or for heaven. God is self-emptying love so that I can discover how to fall in love. *God can only be enjoyed* – Augustine.

It is against the background of such universal love that the ugliness of sin is apparent. Healing, wholeness and forgiveness are not optional add-ons as a consequence of responding to love – they are what loving is. What motivates love is loveliness experienced. Loveliness is proper to the very becoming of the individual reaching out to the lovely – for we can become what we receive. Yet how often are warned of our solemn obligation to God [who can only be enjoyed!], threatened by commands, judged by law? Where is Grace?

What do I owe God? In terms of receiving all from God, we owe everything – so, we are obedient, keeping the commandments, loyalty to Church authority and Mass every Sunday! But, if we listen to God, we owe nothing. God is total and freely-given self-emptying love, love is free, gracious and universal... no conditions apply. The right and proper response to Grace is gratitude.

Jesus does not tell us to stop sinning and love God – his words for the woman washing his feet – *much is forgiven because she loves much*. The mature response to gift is gratitude, becoming what we receive. If we genuinely love there will be no sin. Receiving the gift of love is to become lovely! We are, however, aware of the inadequacy of our loving, enough to realise the need for repentance. Repentance is from me, not from what God tells me. Repentance is the appropriate response for the short-coming of our gratitude. God will not demand repentance of me, but I should demand it of myself:

*Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lack'd anything.*

*'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'  
Love said, 'You shall be he.'  
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
I cannot look on Thee.'  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
'Who made the eyes but I?'*

*'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.'  
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'  
'My dear, then I will serve.'  
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'  
So I did sit and eat.*  
G. Herbert

When we hear good people say how unworthy and selfish they are, our condescending smiles will disappear once we reflect on how intensely they must feel being loved, so graciously and gratuitously. Paul, not noted for his softness of touch [unfairly] experienced this as the very core of his faith. His conversion was his being overwhelmed by the sheer gift of himself to himself, and of all creation, and how both together allowed him intimacy with God.

Our first response to gift is *thank-you*. The sincerity of it is in how much we revel in and enjoy the gift! My life is me, given to myself – it has purpose through the generosity of the Giver; how I live my life tells me what this is. Using the gifts of honesty and integrity when faced with choices helps me discover that purpose: *to act justly, to love tenderly, to walk humbly with God*: Mic.6.8 – shows me the face I had before I was born, the reason why God desired me!

We are told that we have little or no chance of winning the Lottery – have we forgotten what we have already won? The possibility of being specially chosen to be born just because I'm me – from so many billions of possibilities. Why me? We have ritual ways of celebrating good news – how do I celebrate the gift of me to me? There is something about celebration that marks it off from other such activities – it is entirely non-functional, for nothing other than itself. We don't need a reason to celebrate; and *we can't fulfil obligations this way* – celebration is totally for celebration.

The Sacraments are not ritual acts apart from everyday living. Each one highlights something very ordinary – the fragile gift of new life in Baptism; sitting at table together in the Eucharist; reconciliation is not a celebration of weakness, but celebrating the fact that failure and even deliberate sin cannot push God away from us. To celebrate life is to be determined to become fully alive – think of the many heroic people with terminal illnesses who do this; open to richness of passion and the tragedy of suffering.

Is falling in love a random happening? Why do we use *falling*? To fall suggests something unplanned. It suggests something unpredictable – it simply happens; and when it does we feel challenged to let go and let it happen; a great deal of risk is involved, which is only seen as worthwhile through the passion involved. If I opt for the security of having guarantees instead of unpredictable risk, it cannot be called falling! It is not all that different from dying, because of what this will do to me, challenged not just to see things differently, but to live differently, with no guarantees.

Only when I venture into the realm of the unpredictable can surprises happen. When Jesus was asked what he was all about, he said *come and see*; simply feeding their appetite *for something more* and different. Not from an attraction outside, but from a warming from within urging us to go and see. It was this that helped them see something of what it was that *warmed* him to embrace the cross freely; as if he was seeing something well worth dying for. The centrality of the Resurrection gradually brings an awareness of a new way of living that doesn't by-pass death but travels right through it to a new way of living.

Flesh living is where God is in Jesus, the dust of the earth has become the body of God: *the world lives by its incarnation of God in itself* – Whitehead [Alfred North Whitehead – English mathematician/philosopher – d.1947]. Our world is in a mess – hunger, persecution, terrorism and whole sale violence and injustice. There is a randomness about our evolving world. Life is a series of present moments allotted for development – am I today who I was 50 years ago? Yes, I am here still living through a series of present moments. No I'm not the same because during time I have tried to become more than I am at any given time.

I know someone is loving me, I have plenty of evidence of this in my life – I also know this *other* is also loving others through me, and so, hopefully, lets me experience myself as brother. Life is an adventure, challenging us to stretch beyond our reach and discover what can yet be; prompted by the fact that real presence within that *goodness* is better than its opposite; whereas exclusions lead to disintegration. We are not asked to be mimics of Jesus, but to be as adventurous as he was in discovering ways to make life an experience of abundance for others as well as for myself.

This means that uncertainty and the need for making choices responsibly will be constant companions – we must emerge from the infantile need for others to constantly guide – be that other individual or institution [Church]. It would be rash and foolish to discount the wisdom gleaned from the past, but equally to invest recklessly in the excitement of my own preferences. Sometimes the appropriate answer to myself is no. This will become more apparent when I step aside from the rigidity inherent in system living. Jesus' passion was for far more than the last three days of Holy Week.

He had passion for life – *I've come to bring fire... and would that it were already ablaze* – Lk.12.49; passion for people – *Jerusalem, if only you would listen* – Lk.19.41; passion for the poor – *of course I want to* – Mt.8.2. Paul calls this *the ecstatic yell of God's yes to creation* – 2Cor.1.20. This is why Jesus' death is as big as his life; not only humankind, but everything created is the passionate body of God – because of him.

How sad that spirituality peeled off to go down the cul-de-sac of *we are fallen, sinful and damned...* as if suggesting that the more we persuade ourselves of our unworthiness the more suited we are to receive

redeeming grace. The logic of our relationship with God is based on our helplessness, and once we accept this then God eagerly steps in. This has done, and is still doing more harm than we realise. Our experience of loving and being loved is not of weakness; the more intense the experience the greater the freedom – love brings strength not weakness.

But what can I give God that isn't already there? The answer from the Gospel is *fatherhood!* Being parent is not one-directional. Parent on its own makes no sense – there has to be child. Indeed parent creates the child, but the child creates the parent also. My mother cannot be my mum unless I freely own it. There cannot be a father-child relationship with God without both of us being involved. This is strength, not weakness; I can make a difference to Almighty God!

## Prayer

Prayer is how this is everyday living – to be actively engaged with the real God – learned through being actively engaged with mum, dad and siblings. To give expression to this is to pray. I have always struggled with formal presentations of prayer, with recommended methods. *Saying prayers* does not always appeal, often creating more questions than answers. Much of this, for me, is because I'm not a methodical person – which certainly has its downside. But it has given me an experience of prayer that is vibrantly alive, and allows me to realise what *pray always* [not just at agreed times] really means.

Why is prayer important? Why do we expect some *kind* of praying if we go to a religious gathering? Whatever it means, the consensus is that we are not very good at it; possibly because we are missing the pivotal point. Is praying something I need to do every day? Refine it – is prayer *doing* something? I do lots of things, and these things often lead to something else – to get to town I need to catch a bus, for this I need a time-table etc. This is doing something *for* something else. If I try to fit prayer into this model of doing, I have a problem. Prayer, like love and celebration, is not *for* anything other than itself.

When the apostles saw Jesus pray – he wasn't *doing* something, he was *being* someone. He was being himself, the *beloved of Abba*. Is my prayer my personal Google? To ask why do I pray could miss the crucial point – ask rather, why do I find myself *needing* to say I love you, without ever being told to say it? When this said out of love, no matter how often, it is never repetitious. The need to say it comes from deep inside, and is alive and active – never the same today as it was yesterday. It is not describing something but relating – this is who I am because of our relationship. What Scripture calls *doing the truth in love* – Eph.4.15. *I love you* is not meant to produce results. It is trying to express how I am here and now – in the sense that we hear God say *I am who I am* – Ex.3.14.

Why not keep quiet about it? I probably have for some time! But now it demands to be heard – *if I do what you ask the very stones will cry out* – Lk.19.40. I am trying to express what being fully human is like at its very best. Love that is not continually seeking an expression that will fade and die. To try to rekindle it by simply reciting words – words that once carried the experience but no longer do so – will end in frustration. I cannot meaningfully say *I love you*, because it's time to do so.

There is a time to say it – and also *a time to be* what I'm saying – which is the meaning of *pray always* – 1Thess.5.17. *I love you* can be spoken in various ways – I can say it to seduce, to deceive; it can be expressed through song poetry – I can even use it about the inanimate – *I love the early morning – the sunset...* It is only *properly* used in one context and no other – to express what it feels like to be in love. Is it any wonder that S John says *God is love*? We can only enjoy God – Augustine.

Prayer belongs within the *experience* of living faith – to live in love is to be faithful. When John tells us that what matters is God's love for us – we are being reminded that we have to be still and hear God say – *this is who I am for you – Jesus, truly present*. Everything about Jesus is centred on this being the way God's unique love for me is with me. We need to remember the proper sequence is never moving from prayer to faith, this would suggest that prayer is to achieve an effect. The truth is just the opposite, because I believe I pray. Just as Jesus pointed out to Simon the Pharisee – it is a loving person who knows all about forgiveness, *her sins, her many sins, have been forgiven because she has shown so much love* – Lk.7.

What do lovers do? The ordinary things of life without using religious language – and I can give a powerful expression of my love life without any reference to God. But I need to remember that faith and love are

different expressions of the same reality. Faith incarnates love. I don't say *I love you* to fall in love, the expressing comes after the experience of fidelity. Lovers make themselves really present to each other – the actions, the words, the joy they share are the ways this happens. So intensely does this become that the two in effect become one.

What do faithful people do? All kinds of everyday things, but always with the other in mind. But of the many things proper to lovers and faith folk – does any single activity – or even all of them together contain the *essence* of love and fidelity? We have to say no – even though this is how we experience real presence. I am challenged to come out of hiding, take off the masks, precisely because love is for me *as I am!* As love compels honesty, so prayer needs integrity.

Prayer is moving gently into the real and vibrant presence of one who desires me just as I am – in no way is it trying to get God to notice me.

### **Almighty God?**

I have long had an aversion to the expression almighty God; I wasn't sure why – it was simply unreal. I believe God believes in me, which enables me to believe in God. My living has not always reflected this; I have prayed to get... for change to happen... I have used prayer without any reference to intimacy with God. Is there a place for prayer of petition? Surely the Our Father is virtually all petition?

What kind of power does *almighty* God have? How does *God who is nothing else but love fit*? Love is essentially gift – our own experience tells us that love is only experienced lovingly. It is customary to classify power by determining how much power: e.g. between an animal and a stone. The more power the greater; and when we come to God, who has to have it all, we have almighty God. If this is so, why doesn't God intervene to prevent cruelty and injustice? How does almighty sit with only love? God loves me totally, but if I misbehave he will send me to hell!!! The carrot and stick.

There are two kinds of power. There is nothing inherently wrong with using power to produce an effect; this is the stuff of everyday living – power is the ability to produce a result. What power is needed to fire a jet engine, or a pacemaker? We calculate how much force is required to do this. Add the word *brute* to force and what do we have? Power against another without their consent, which can be used to restrict or remove freedom of choice.

Dictatorships flourish in this way – working against the free choice of people. At individual human level such power is bullying. The Scientific revolution and economic explosion at global level has attuned us to accept such systematic and coercive power. Both Church and State have taken this on board, believing that a certain amount of coercive power benefits the common good. However, in Church affairs, such power descended into the freedom of the children of God becoming the freedom to obey. Even though the use of some coercive power has good results, yet all coercion, by definition, militates against freedom – tends to operate by asserting the means justifies the end.

This cultural reality, applied to God, makes God the supreme bully! Whereas God prompts me to love with everything I am capable of, and even augments this with Grace. So why is divine worship so important? I am aware of personal well-being when I live and act responsibly, being creative, helping set others free. Human energy flows best when free from every kind of constraint; just as I feel abused when another imposes their will on me in complete disregard of my freedom.

A question to ask: how do I freely encourage you, an equally free person to act freely? Only when the value leads to something contributing to your well-being, without cost or pressure. We hear the cynic say *there's no such thing as a free meal* – what about the Eucharist? Such power can never be coercive, solely persuasive. With persuasive power it is not my power of persuasion that is operative, but the attractiveness of the ensuing goodness – *the truth will set you free* – Jn.8.32.

Both coercion and persuasion have something in common – to produce an effect. But the way this is achieved makes them poles apart. Coercion is imposition, whereas persuasion lures us towards goodness without strings. The only power that does not violate personal freedom is persuasive, linked to integrity. Responding freely and responsibly does not, on its own, make the experience easy. It simply highlights how

much I'm willing to endure in the name of freedom – it shows me my heart's desire; and to refuse to say yes would mean I'm not being true to myself.

Is this nothing more than romanticism? See the lengths parents go to for the well-being of their children, often requiring virtually heroic self-denial. This is why Jesus did not order, but invited his friends to come and see. The rich young man declined the offer – but went away sad! Jesus shows that God is not law and order, simply love and nothing else; complete and universal self-emptying.

I profess to know God is love, and I believe I am made in this image; but I am many other things as well! I am insecure and weak, and so selfish that I need coercive power to defend myself. The prevalence of such power among us plays havoc with gifts like tranquillity and peace. At times not even God's love is enough. Vulnerability is not weakness; it is the fruit of love.

The one thing love cannot do when confronted by coercion and violence is to become violent and coercive. The cross doesn't say God's patience is inexhaustible, that God will not coerce or resort to violence – but that God *cannot* violate or coerce. Jesus crucified shows that survival through violence is worse than death. There is no power, no persecution or fear of violence that can overcome love.

Yes, he died and they even mocked his dying – but yes he is risen, not to vanquish or conquer, but to go on loving. Sadly, we trawl the Gospels to reduce them to whatever commands we can find. My eternal well-being becomes my selfish priority – if I live selfishly motivated, I will be selfishly saved! The way I live my death is the way I will live eternal life. But if I really want commands, there is still hope even here – *a new commandment I give you, love as you are loved* – Jn.13.34.

How can something as inherently free as love be a command? As with all Jesus' teaching, this is not an order but an invitation – like *come and see... follow me... I dare you!* Likewise, with *take – an invitation and eat*, as with every meal, an invitation to come and share. He is daring us to risk letting ourselves be loved through a new way of being human. No promises, no assurances, no guarantees – simply *taste and see*.

Love never works against my will – he let his executioners do what they willed – but what was it that eventually prompted them to say *truly, this was the Son of God?* We are accustomed to hear and use the statement *it's God's will* when we can't offer explanations! Whatever use we make of such pronouncements, God's will is unambiguously clear – God desires me to realise how much I am loved. All I will find of God this side of the grave is this earth, this neighbour so that by embracing both I can begin to realise true love in my life. When I am actively willing to taste and see, then the word *abundance* becomes my experience. I am here not to get to there – but to enjoy the journey.

There isn't an abstract image of me in God's mind, the ideal me that I will eventually be judged against. Simply the eternal desire in God that I don't miss out on anything I could be – *to act justly, to love tenderly, to walk humbly with God* - Mic.6.8.

### **Prayer of Petition**

When questions are asked about prayer it is normally prayer of petition that is being queried – *say one for me!* If we want to break prayer down into categories [?] we could see four main areas. Adoration, Thanksgiving, Repentance and Petition. But if there is no coercive power in God, why pray? Petition is asking for something – I am asking God to exercise power, to produce an effect. Even praying for God to change someone's inner motivation for the better, for some kind of conversion. If God could do this on request, God could do it whenever, request or not. This doesn't sit comfortably with God is love.

To hold in love is to respect the freedom of the other. The only power in God is persuasion, honouring that freedom. So what do we intend in our prayers of petition? First, prayer cannot be hived off from the rest of our life; it belongs within the context of the whole of my life; it is from here true worship [worthship] flows. Worship is any conscious attempt to bring my life into a living experience of God. Worship is the only properly religious activity – prayer is an act of worthship.

Can I do anything for God? God doesn't love out of need, love is who God is, no distinction between what God does and who God is. In fact, lovers don't do anything for each other - simply being love, a real

presence totally for the other. The only appropriate response to the total gratuity of self-emptying is gratitude expressed through celebration. To ask the giver of a gift *how much do I owe* – is not on. Gift is such purely and simply. So why do we do it to God, who is total self-emptying love? My life is gift – there is no mortgage, no debt – why do I believe I have to repay by keeping the commandments etc.?

The first movement in prayer should be gratitude for gift, through living the gift to the full – celebration. What was said of Francis was that *he did not so much pray as become a prayer*. Prayer is not an exercise in self-improvement, it is not what I get out of it but what I put into it. But we also need petition, and Jesus showed us how, by giving us a prayer that is full of it. See the rain-dance, something special to Native Americans among others. This was labelled superstition by outsiders – a dance used to cause rain. It has taken centuries for us to realise that the rain dance is not to get rain, but an act of homage to the one who created rain – the rain-making God.

We had the same problem with the Sacraments, seeing them as causing Grace – whereas they celebrate the giftedness of God; what God has done, is doing and always will do. No human activity can cause God to give Grace. The Eucharist, sharing a common meal – we can add to the spirit of celebration by bringing a gift [never compulsory] a gift external to ourselves – wine, flowers etc.... But when we sit to share food we pass food to each other, sharing a life-giving gift, even though the food is external to us. This is the symbolism of Eucharist – instead of the food we eat becoming part of us, we become part of the body of Christ, and so become one with each other.

Life is determined by the intensity and quality of our relating. Eucharist celebrates the life-giving love of God freely given as food. We do not cause this life, we simply celebrate it; our sharing is our belonging to God who is totally self-sharing. When I bring myself to the Eucharist I bring all of myself, including all my concerns for other people [who we are praying for!]; I come experiencing my life – *and it is me experiencing my life that is welcomed by God – this is petition*.

When you have had *one of those days* when nothing has gone right – and get back home, to be asked *what kind of day you have had* – the temptation is to tell it all, with nothing missing. You are not expecting your wife/husband to put things right – simply to be heard, to let another share your pain – and yet it all melts into proportion when he/she gives you a hug. It is this that will let you get up tomorrow and go out again. That simple hug does it all – yet actually does nothing!

What does this say about prayer of petition? What I bring to prayer is me as I am, in need of a hug. God doesn't *make things right*, but the hug tells me that even though everything is not all right, I am all right. It isn't correct to say we grow stronger through adversity [this has led to formators actually creating adversity]. It is growth in loving and being loved that shows – God believes in me, just as I am. God's acceptance of me in this way is infallible – it will never waver or fail me.

My real petitions arise from my experience of living. How sad to presume prayers go unanswered because I don't feel any discernible results. Prayer assures me that I am being healed because, whatever the circumstances, I am slowly appreciating that through it all I am being loved. Rationalising is important, but is not primary, there are other ways, and we can let our deeper selves surface creatively, psychologically and emotionally – in words and in silence. At times words are useless, when simple awareness says all is well and I belong at the heart of it.

We can never be purely objective; I am conditioned by my experience of life. Often it is anger, fear and hurt we want to get a hearing; but I need to be present as my angry and fearful self – with God loving me. We are people of language, not just in naming reality, but in developing what life seems to promise and which calls for our responsibility. This is where prayer belongs, allowing faith its proper articulation allowing relationships to flourish.

Vows tend to be a once and for all happening, with so much of self-involved as not to trivialise – the words are not just for the time-being, but for the long-haul. This is why prayer really matters. No way can I simply *hear Mass* by going through the motions, and saying prayers. Real language has to be first person language, no one can do this for us, while we just sit and listen. A prayerful person will be recognised not by time spent in Church, but in life-lived.

I am a product of relationships which precede me and have fostered me. I am *in debt* for the air I breathe right through to the affection I enjoy – I am social by nature. So, what is my social self? I am because of the *Grace of other than me*. *Love your neighbour* is not an imposed task, it is a necessity for my well-being. Which means *how* I believe as an individual has social relevance. When God speaks in OT it is in a social context: *because you were slaves in Egypt* – Ex.22.20. Elsewhere – *because you know what it means to suffer, do not knowingly inflict this on others*.

How can I *love with all my heart and strength* when my *experience* tells me I don't matter? How will I know that I am worthwhile? Before seeking an answer I need to ask myself have I ever lived-up to what I have committed myself to, how intensely have I been involved? Often we have little say in where we are and what we are asked to do. But I have the *only* say about the quality of my commitment. Faith assures me that things are worth the effort – I am there not because I have to be but because I want to be – instead of *my heart just isn't in it*.

Jesus' stories describe passion, and not one of them is dedicated to stressing the importance of doctrine. Being asked *who is my neighbour* he talks about a Good Samaritan – a story that doesn't use the word *love*, yet is saturated with it. Our problem is not to do with strangers but with the quality of our passion. His stories are not about places or conditions – but about varied human behaviour, when we don't even notice. When asked about qualifications for entry into the kingdom, apart from a willingness to be there, there are no requests for certificates or need for references. Just feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and looking after the lonely and incapacitated.

All this is open to everybody, a passion for the well-being of others. The ethos of kingdom life – affection, justice, equality, peace and compassion – only exists when such as these are actually happening, being faithful. See this in all the parables. A handicap could be our inability to see or hear God, I see myself, I hear you, I'm aware of where we are... Jesus says that's all we need! The key is our relating rather than simply obeying, it is in the one-to-one that we can discover what is involved in saying *I'm sorry*. If I can't discover what it means to say sorry to you, God has no chance of hearing me say it either.

The first stage of forgiveness is self-forgiveness. How can I ask God to forgive what I'm not ready to forgive? Our world is where faith belongs – where living with you happens. How unreal to claim we cannot find God when surrounded by so much hunger, pain and suffering, as well as so much to be grateful for. I'm as close to God as I am to the person I've just ignored, excluded – or hugged! John reminds us: if I say to God *I love you above all things* when I simply disregard or find inconvenient people I don't like, I'm a liar.

*Unless you lose your life you will never find it* – the relationship between self and other, any other, is where my truth and integrity is to be found. All this happens in that space where my struggle to really a human being takes place. How do I find harmony between me and all that is not me? Religious practice has to mean that I can be with myself – aloneness, not lonely – discovering that *alone* can only flourish through relationships. As each relationship starts and grows, it embraces an increasing network with the realising that everything in creation already belongs.

Self-worth remains an abstract ideal until it becomes part of living and moving. I can't relate to creation *in general* I need you and you and this and that so that I can discover that I too am needed and desired. This is how I become aware about real living, how loving is crucial for life in abundance – all this is *alive* within me calling for attention. We are not a crowd of individuals existing, each in our own right, before God; but because of God-Creator we already belong before ever we become aware of it. If there is a debt for my life it is say thank-you for all those loves that are coming my way, simply telling me who I am.

This is faith-living becoming tangible as well as vital. I owe so much gratitude for simply being me with so much undreamed-of potential, making mutuality eminently possible as well as crucial. S Paul sees this as *seeing in a glass darkly* – we live by faith and not by sight! This has to be since wherever there is gift there is likewise the challenge to respond in trust. The highest expression of being human is faith-living, having total freedom to rely on the trustworthiness of another. It might at first sound very challenging, but it is an everyday must.

We fashion scientific do's and don'ts – what some would call natural law; simply describing discerned cosmic behaviour which we cannot control, the sun rises, there is a right mix of oxygen and gravity is very real. With people too there has to be an amount of trust, which is how we cope with the unpredictable. We trust not just because we find we can do so, but that *we need* to do so. Underpinning all this is the ultimate in trust, to break through the finite barrier; daring to hope that our mortal striving has immortal worth. Which Jesus addresses with *where I am you too will be*. This is an almost impudent hope, rising out of the love that is explaining us.

Our times have brought a mistrust of institution – both political and religious. Which is not necessarily a bad thing if it frees us to choose from within our own conviction rather than through institutional coercion. But it has a dark side in that it has brought a devaluing of commitment, seeing is as something that doesn't sit well with an evolving life pattern, which seems to rule out permanent investment in the future. Commitment requires faith, trust and love. We make a choice for value which we will steadfastly pursue, come what may I will be faithful. Why make a commitment? Because to lose the value of asking for commitment would be losing something of myself – I couldn't see me as me without it.

Love is the most compelling of values. So real is this that I don't want to keep quiet about it, I see it as a necessary part of life. Because we do not know the circumstances of the future we pledge our hearts that together we remain faithful to what we are discovering. Such is the essence of love, which is for nothing other than itself; love is for loving and is only known lovingly, which we would be diminished without.

Having made the commitment we are making sure we won't be put off no matter what happens. We do this not by trying to set about removing whatever can be foreseen, but by stoking the fire of love so that nothing will ever quench it. It is the vibrant experience of loving that underpins this. We do not and should not commit ourselves arbitrarily; so much passion is involved that we pledge ourselves only to what is worthy of it – it is our heart's desire.

Commitment belongs between person and person, never to objects or institutions – loyalty when appropriate, but not commitment. We say we are committed to marriage, to the Church. Because commitment calls for the pledge of heart which is life-enriching, shaping how I see myself moving into being fully alive. I can only pledge my living self to another living self moving into deeper mutuality.

Why do we have a negative attitude to anyone investing self solely on wealth creation, or being power hungry and status greedy: *what gain in winning the whole world and losing your soul*. How can I possibly love my neighbour as myself if my first love is a thing or an idea? We do make commitments to institutions – Church, marriage, religious life – such relationships only have value if persons are involved with persons. Marriage is simply the formal structure whereby commitment is made to another person; commitment to Church is to a community of persons – the mystical body.

There is nothing inherently life-enhancing in having no genital experience. Celibacy is always celibacy for the Kingdom – for the love and service of people. Celibacy is always a means, never an end. A means is never sanctifying in itself, only as a means to an end – intimacy with God. It is not a happy description to speak of living a *vowed life*, no more than calling marriage a vowed life. There is no *necessary* connection between celibacy and commitment to God and neighbour. It is possible to be celibate without loving either God or neighbour as it is to love God and neighbour without being celibate.

Celibacy receives value in virtue of the end it is trying to achieve. If my celibacy is not helping me love others more deeply, it has little worth. Consecrated celibacy is a structural form allowing us to be single-minded and wholeheartedly committed to God and neighbour. Only God whom we do not see and our neighbour whom we do see are worthy of our heart's pledge. To be valued in my relationship to the Church, to a principle or a cause, is to be used/abused and devalued – when *authority* can be employed to make me an object to be dealt with rather than a subject to be respected.

Jesus says love with all your heart and strength – not through obedience to law, subservience to institution, but out of genuine concern for well-being. Only persons merit commitment – if I am in a position of authority and have to make a decision over principle or the person – which would come first? To love neighbour is to

esteem worthiness in neighbour and/or stranger. What matters is the sincerity of effort rather than getting results.

The only available evidence of the quality of loving is the fruit it produces. I live within two assertions – God is nothing else than self-emptying love; and, God desires abundant life for everyone, no matter who. Try to complete this sentence without any hesitation: God is love, love creates only lovely things; but God created me...? And did this so that all could enjoy life to the full, each one uniquely and personally.

Gospel living: *Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?* – Is.58.7. Wherever you see goodness celebrate it; where you see goodness damaged, repair it; where it is missing – bring it with you! Whatever God does is not done alone. The struggle for good living, for peace with justice, for happiness without cost – is as arduous for God as for us.

We are not conscripts working for God, but enthusiastic sharers in his passion for life; we are not recruited to fight for good against evil, simply to *be* whatever it takes for others to be free to love and choose. Such a commitment led Jesus into the heart of everyday living and so into everyday dying to make it every day rising. Suffering is not love and cannot be substituted for it. Love doesn't seek suffering, but seeks to overcome it; which is the persistent call from Scripture.

Not even the cross should be held up as something to strive for. Christ would have risen no matter how he died – it's to our shame that we made him do this on the cross. The message of the cross is that love is inevitably suffering love. The cross says that our most passionate loving will occasion our greatest suffering. To follow Christ is not mimicry, nor to repeat what he said and what he did. What is true is that each one of us carries a uniqueness – an ability to make God present as no one else can.

Are we facing not just an uphill task but an impossible one in thinking we can make a difference to our world? Jesus doesn't ask us to change the world but first to change ourselves and let the fruits of this be seen and shared; and he promises to help us – *I will take away your heart of stone and put in you a heart of flesh*. I am being told that I am Good News! Not that I now have something that was missing, rather becoming aware I am part of the body of God – the mystical Christ.

Genesis insistently has God saying *let there be...* God calls into being by allowing what is destined to *become*, to do so, by the way we live with it. Evolution is the tortuous meander by which atoms and the like become ordered into higher life forms. Neither Genesis nor the Gospel justify us laying down rules and regulations about becoming. History shows we are a law-conscious people – *keep the rule and the rule will keep you* – and such legal scaffolding.

Spiritual life is based on trust not law – just as life itself has more to with mission than simply with maintenance. My faith is not that I am good, right, and lovely – but that *I am* because I am loved. This I can experience through the many unforeseen opportunities to love and be loved that come my way. God lets me be because my loving only has quality when it is freely and enthusiastically chosen. I can desire eternal life with all my heart – even when there is a suggestion of doubt: how can this be with death waiting round the corner?

Prayer is the ability to hold all this in positive tension, that reality as it is experienced – the good, the bad and the ugly – is the very stuff with which to fashion our future. What makes it prayer and not self-pity is the trust that this raw material has been redeemed. It is trusting that the only life I've got – even sorely wounded – can be life-giving because it is sustained by gracious relationships. I must not look for answers or cures, for signs and wonders – only the courage to remain in love with life – asking what am I willing to settle for?

Life is meant to pose and answer the question – what would pure loving look like in the world I know? The new command – to love as I am loved – is not so much a command as a dare. I dare you to try! Worship means worthship – my life is full of sweet and sour. I live in a good world, full of goodness and good people. In other words, life is worth it. When Jesus said to me as well – *come and see* – I wasn't yet aware that this would take a life-time – it has to be all or nothing.

