



Welcome to the 11th edition of *The Word*. This is a rather special issue featuring two very long articles by Fr Austin and Br Chris. However, both are well worth the read. I was tempted to split them into parts and publish over several issues but I think reading them as entire articles is much better.

In addition we have some reflections on Pentecost and finally a pointer to the usual web resources and a little more help in navigating our web.

If you would like to feature your group, ministry or activity in a future edition then please send a mail to parishnews@stthomaswoodford.org. Your contributions are vital to keep alive the communication within our parish family. Articles can be of any length up to around 1000 words.

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How do I know what I believe?

Fr Austin

What do I really *believe*? Am I simply being told – hearing and repeating what I've been told, or read? Is God real for me, or am I just tied to rules and repetitive ritual behaviour? How can I by-pass my head and get to my heart?

I am aware of a difference between *reading Scripture and simply reciting words*. For me, reciting is mechanistic and can become repetitively *more of the same*. Reading calls for something to happen before sounding: what is this saying to me, now [it will be different tomorrow] *God makes all things new* – Is.43.18; Rev.21.5. Where there is simply repetition – God isn't there!

In praying the *Our Father*, for me, there is an important difference between saying *thy will be done*, and *thy will be done!* One asks honestly that God's will be done, the other challenges me to be active in letting this be in me – by letting go of any and everything that can be called *mine*.

My faith assures me that I come from God – the *why* of my existence is in the very heart of the Trinity. If I would know *why* God has given me to myself, I need first to *listen*, and not try to work it out for myself. I am aware of being able to *listen to what the Lord has to say, a voice that speaks of peace* –Ps.85.8.

Peace is not negative – not the absence of war, hostility, revenge and the like. Julian says: *all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well*. When I am full of peace, peaceful, I am involved in an experience, not just reciting words.

Peter's *reaction [not just his thinking]* is eloquent here – fully aware of what he has done, through being afraid; he has betrayed... and then sees Jesus' glance at him! Truly *a voice that spoke of peace*, a glance with no hint of recrimination, simply assuring that all will be well – like Judas, he couldn't forgive himself; unlike Judas he was assured, by that glance, that he was already forgiven! Which Judas could also have had, if only he had looked beyond himself.

This is the flesh and blood reality of *I have come for sinners* – Lk.5.32. The truth – my sinfulness and selfishness can be *my entitlement to Christ*, who says specifically that he has come for the likes of me, a sinner, if I would simply believe it.

What we actually do with this truth in other people is verging on blasphemy – we highlight their sinfulness, brokenness, mistakes – we trespass on holy ground; we know nothing of the joy of the Prodigal's father – *your brother/sister was lost, and has come home!* Lord, help our unbelief in each other!

How does this get real for me, and not just remain words in a Creed said every Sunday? The Church has never confessed belief in sin – but belief in the *forgiveness* of sin. Why do we dodge the issue in reciting the

Creed: *I believe in God* – when we should be saying *God believes in me – and you...* I can speak the words, and like the unjust steward, take what benefits me and continue to make unreasonable and unfair demands of you. If this is true, it will be obvious from the inevitable change, or not, in how I live every day. By our fruits we are known; sweet and sour?

The evidence for a real faith life, is change. *See how these Christians love one another* – Tertullian. There is a hiatus between *wanting change and letting it happen*. Letting it – is crucial, because I can't change myself, but I can be changed – if I'm prepared to let-go my way - not because it is wrong, but because it isn't *the way* I have said I wish to go. [*making way for intimacy to become experience*]. Jesus never forged ahead in his life, he was *led by the Spirit*.

Intimacy thrives on self-donating, as many couples show us. The one left behind in bereavement will often say: *Half my life has gone!* When, in fact, *all* has gone. They never gave half-of-themselves to each other! The self, exchanged with me, has gone!

The way into such intimacy is eagerly seeking to-be-with as often as possible. S Francis showed this from another angle – he was first regarded as a lovable eccentric in the way he loved and enjoyed the whole creation. This he was able to do by seeing himself as a creature among fellow creatures, not as a human being *different* from.

Whether we realise it or not, before ever we are aware of it, we already belong. We all have the one origin – we have God's DNA. We are all equal, but never the same. God never makes copies!

So – back to basics. What does all this mean for me?

Is my God the *Supreme Being, who alone exists of himself, infinite in all perfection*? Almighty, all powerful? If all these epithets were forgotten, or no longer preached, would it make any difference to my everyday living?

Change happens for a reason. If there has been no root and branch change in my life – there is no reason for me to stop doing things my way, no point in changing: *if it ain't broke, don't fix it!* Yet, we all want to belong, and belonging stirs up something in me. I experience a preference to let someone else have a say in my life, maybe even *I prefer your vision of me to my own; share it with me*.

Love loves the lovely – change happened to Francis when he began to notice the difference between cherishing something lovely, and seeing love itself without the thing! He always gave thanks for all that was given to him, but preferred to be with the Giver not the gift – *his heart's desire*.

Not to get, but to be-with love itself. There is a world of difference between the welcome sight of a log fire on a cold night, and experiencing its warmth! God can't be seen or known – only enjoyed. When the neighbours of the woman at Jacob's Well, after hearing what had happened to her, went to see Jesus; they came home and thanked her for what she had shared with them – but said *we believe because we have heard him for ourselves*.

God doesn't make copies – only originals [*no two snowflakes are the same*]. I can say, and probably have said, that I would like to experience the presence of God as Francis did; but I can't, no more than Francis could experience God as I could. The real difference is; it has happened for him, I'm still in the *not yet but will be state* – *hopefully!*

It is more than likely that a majority of Christians are, in fact, monotheists; all the while professing belief in One God in Three Persons – Trinitarian in name, but... God is Trinity – one God!

Where there is only One: The principle of one means isolated *loneliness*; the principle of two is *confrontational and rivalistic* inclining towards preference; in the principle of three is ebbing and *flowing, dynamism and creativity*.

Which is why we don't start with one and try to make three; but show how three are truly one. God is not one being among so many others. God *is being*. God *is* love – not *has* love. Which is why the three are one – *the lover, the beloved, the love they share*. Father, Son and Spirit.

In past centuries, and even now, the Church has tended to favour Aristotle's priority of substance over relationship. The Church wanted a substantial God, not a vaguely relational God; a God we could prove to be totally transcendent, better than...

Jesus arrived, telling us he is *Son of Abba*, and they are one: *I and the Father are One* – Jn.10.30. Relationship is clearly important for him. But who wants to be just a relationship? I want to be a self-made man – a man of substance! Augustine speaks of God as three substances, united as one. Aquinas comes closer, speaking of one substance with relationship its nature. God is relationship.

Damaged or incomplete human beings are such, due to an inability to sustain or maintain relationships. Whereas. God is relationship, and Salvation is willingness to stay related. Jesus shows us how to live this

Trinity relating, by giving us the same Spirit that is in him. The Word of God takes flesh so that we who share humanness with him can now live this new way. The whole reason for the Incarnation.

Could the present lock-down give us the opportunity to stay related?

Many Christians, perhaps a majority, are afraid of God; making religious practice a kind of insurance policy against the fear of hell. This happens probably through downplaying the role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is beyond control – *the Spirit [God's love life] blows where he will* – Jn.3.8. The Spirit is God's eternally ongoing, and freely available love-life.

This why the only appropriate language when speaking of God, is metaphor. The actual word Trinity isn't to be found in NT. Yet its essence is there. We have Jesus speaking of God, who is other than himself, and offering to share part of himself and part of the Father's self – called the Holy Spirit.

Father, Son and Spirit.

We have lost the ability to *know as God knows*. To allow another to know in us, through us and for us – so that we too can know as we are *known*. I can't know God with objectifying knowledge when I see an object, form an opinion about what I am seeing. The Divine cannot be seen in this way; I only know when I actually *experience myself as part of what I am seeing*.

A true mirror first receives and then reflects back truthfully what it has received. What matters is to find the right mirror, one that receives me exactly as I am, reflects my real self back to me, exactly as I am, until I can become, like S Paul, my own true *imago Dei*. *I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me* – Gal.2.20.

Love, goodness and wholeness are not achievements – but gifts, reflected from Christ through the mirror; letting me be as creation already sees me. In seeking to become what is being reflected to us, we complete the circle of love – now *in my end is my beginning* – Eliot.

I came to being without my consent, so that I could really, truly and freely own my beginning with my consent. God never presumes – but waits, patiently for such a living and eager answer. *Be it done to me according to your Word* – Lk.1.38.

Jesus comes from the very heart of intimacy in God, to show me, and invite me to join-in this unique experience of being fully alive. For this, I need to let the Spirit that leads Jesus, lead me – the Spirit he breathed into us. *Whoever looks into the perfect Law of Freedom, and abides there, becoming what has been heard – will be blest in what they do* – Jas.1.25.

We have a preference for *logical* knowing and *ritual practice* – often repeated. Whereas, what can be truly mirrored happens only once. There is no second-hand knowing God – it is all or nothing. And because it is meant for all, without exception, it is possible for all – even those temporarily impeded by human restrictions and exclusions.

God has no grandchildren. Everyone is a first-born. *For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren* – Rom. 8.29.

There is implanted in everyone evidence of our ability to belong at the highest level – to be at one with our Creator. If I come from God, there is DNA to testify to this. Everyone, without exception, carries an *inbuilt attraction to goodness*.

The road we actually take towards meaningful living is often neither easy nor attractive. It is a mix of *caring and not caring, giving and keeping, confusing want with need*. But whatever the road it is my experience of walking-it that opens me up to where God is in all this. But it needs to be *my reality* not a prefab. By my reality, I mean the reason *why God* created me; not what I have made of it! The Christian way is never one we work out for ourselves, but one on offer for us – *follow me*.

Before ever there was Original Sin there is, and remains, Original Goodness. Original Goodness [God] appeals to our inbuilt DNA, our bias towards good things – something worth pursuing and enjoying [*another word for vocation*].

God is real – and cannot be where anything is unreal – *unreal in the sense that it has no room for goodness that is not universal goodness* – not where some are in and others are out – *real* knows nothing of exclusions, since God's reality [love] is universal. This is why God is always where everyone belongs.

We cannot think God; nor do we find God *by doing good*. *We become aware that we have already been found by God e.g. when we feel God's suffering for the world, as well as God's delight in Creation*.

So much of my life is done *my way* – there is nothing radically wrong with that, except that *my way* is not *the way*; what *I prefer*, my vision of reality cannot be God's because God is *totally other*, universally, unchangingly always new.

To be real I need to let go of *my way*; because it's not big enough. Prayer and meditation are often suggested as ways to do this, and they can be beneficial, but are superfluous *if I am still living in my unreality*. It is the ongoing challenge *to be led and not to lead*. There is questionable virtue in: *I did it my way!*

Life doesn't require a Sat Nav before we daily set-out to live. Life is risk, asking me to be willing to find out where, why and how, by actually stepping out and living - *come and see*. This stepping-out, far from being

aimless, is prompted by that inner need, *not just to know that good is preferable to its opposite, but also to feel the need to let this become real in me.*

I am being asked by my very being to let what is good become flesh through my prayerful discerning and responsible choosing. Becoming more and more aware that belonging through genuine relationships is vital, and that exclusions, for whatever reason, lead to personal disintegration.

That goal, pursuit of what is universally good, according to Scotus, *is the sharing of God's life, as an equal*; something so fruitful as to require constant expression. The ultimate goal is sharing the life of the Trinity. Within the Trinity the Word is the centre, the middle member.

As the self-emptying love of the Trinity is expressed in the act of creation, the Son being the Image or Form for everything created. If God's ultimate goal is our sharing in the divine life, our union with Christ Incarnate is the eternally destined bridge linking creation, particularly humanity, to the inner life of God.

Precise definitions of the Three Persons in One God can be a distraction – what matters is the *relationship they enjoy* – what has been called the Divine Dance – a Circle Dance because we are included.

All Creation is relational – and sin is best understood as any and everything that would block this endeavour. Jesus took religious leaders of his day to task who were set to condemn the woman caught in adultery [*doesn't it take two for adultery?*] rather than the woman herself. This, and the whole of Jn.8 stands as the critique of stone-throwing, and all efforts to highlight the sin of others.

Whenever, wherever, we refuse mutuality toward anything, when we won't allow our inbuilt connectedness to lead us, when we are not tuned-into both giving and receiving – we are attempting to block the activity of the Holy Spirit. The sin that can't be forgiven! [*Because we don't believe we have done anything wrong and so do not ask forgiveness!*].

This is why true evil, true sin is well-disguised. *I have a right to be upset... no one deserves my kindness...*

Equal but never the Same

God is all about dissolving boundaries. Creation cries-out that God loves diversity. The Planet TV presentations show something of the plethora of difference. Look in vain for any evidence of uniformity. We like uniformity, because it offers us some control. See how we readily substitute uniformity [*one size fits all*] for unity, obedience for love.

The Trinity are diverse and distinct persons – and are completely one. There is an intrinsic natural plurality of Goodness. Goodness isn't *sameness*. Goodness needs *contrast and tension*, not uniformity. Father, Son and Spirit are one God, clearly different. Then there are, then, three shapes to pure goodness: the giver, the given-to, the love they share.

We see this reflected in Creation, in the making of unique persons, not a unified mass. This tells us that Heaven is not uniformity.

Because we didn't honour Trinity as we should have, we lost our way when facing Evolution. Jesus told us: *In my Father's house are many mansions* – Jn.14.2 – telling us that even in the vast, eternal nature of things: I am me, and no one else is the same as I am.

I probably have said in the past; *I want to be like Francis of Assisi*. What God says, is he wants me to be Austin, from Skem!

This seems so insignificant, and yet it is truly liberating. I already am the gift God wants – am I motivated by this, or do I want to be someone else? There is a unity between where I am going, and how I am getting there. Am I what God is hoping for, or will he have to say *truly, I don't recognise you* – Mt.7.21. If I insist on making myself unrecognisable, I will succeed.

Such is the risk God takes in letting me do my own thing. And there is more – God can take the dead-ends of doing it my way – and use them to my favour! We come to God through tragedy – through our mistakes much more than through our successes. Success has nothing to teach us spiritually. It simply feels good. We learn much more through failure.

Trinity reveals a pattern in freedom, whereby each person allows others to be themselves – including all creation: e.g. all rivers to be crystal clear and not soiled by pollutants. This is gift we afford to each other – they can be themselves when I'm around.

Because God is love, and love is continually transcending itself – saying *I love you*, again and again, if it is true, cannot be repetition. Trinity is ever newness in love. Every divine person is a transcendent abundance of love – and eternally free. Diversity is created and maintained in Trinitarian love, where union is not destroyed.

Lord, take me where you want me to go, show me who you want me to meet, tell me what you want me to say and keep me out of your way!

God for us – is our Father. God one of us – is Jesus. We one with God – Holy Spirit.

As it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever – Amen.



Alongside our Church

Br Chris

Alongside our Church, Franciscan community friary and Hall (the Becket Centre) there is a little set of a dozen houses called Friars Gate Close. A number of the people living there are on good terms with one another, as families or as individuals, but most do not have much connection with the Franciscans next door. There has been an opportunity to move on beyond this recently with the weekly national outburst of showing greater support for the NHS by stepping outside into the nearest street every Thursday evening to clap for the NHS loudly and enthusiastically. On the 7th May this little, socially-distanced show of friendliness was one day before the VE Day commemoration, so the residents out on the street agreed to come out a second time that week, on the Friday evening, with a glass of wine, to achieve another experience of solidarity under pressure. It was an enjoyable hour or so, a good step in the direction of real neighbourliness. For some that was a fairly natural step, a chance for one man to talk about his yachting and his hobby of astronomy. He had read Guy Consolomagno's book *Turn Left at Orion*, a classic, but was surprised to learn that Guy was a Jesuit who provides a column quite often to the Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*. For others it was more unusual. One lady stood close enough to me to chat, but could only say "How embarrassing", by which she meant, as she explained, that she was not used to large social groups. Yet less than twenty people had appeared. How solidarity actually takes shape in practice is often a mix of dissimilar feelings, remarks and wishes. One man's daughter, who was not there, is a musician and has been able to make a kind of a career from that, but the self-isolating patterns we now have make musical events almost unachievable. And so many of the classical pieces she has played publicly in the past are now available in professional versions on Spotify that her chances of building up a new set of supportive opportunities are looking very shaky.

It was also a little startling to me that some of those who knew each other slightly, or were on nodding acquaintanceship terms, while very much living in close physical proximity to our Church building, had not felt it would be good to say 'hello' to any of us previously, or to find out what exactly a Franciscan is. They seemed to be fazed by any use of the phrase 'a religious community'! They were not being rude or unfriendly, but they were caught up within a style of 'social distancing' that has been a feature of English life for a very long time, a reticence to make the first move in getting to know any strangers. It is as well to add that this problem does exist in many countries and cultures other than the English one. Catholics even in Italy have had to think through ways of publicising a community and its religious values to their neighbours. The Ursuline sisters who run schools in Brentwood, Ilford and Forest Gate have some experience of this. Their foundress, Angela Merici, collaborated with a Franciscan who had been very active in Palestine, in the 'Holy Places' which traditions have associated with the life of Jesus Christ. The result of this collaboration was a kind of pilgrimage region called Varallo, not far from Turin. It contains perhaps two dozen imaginative reconstructions of places that were important in the life and mission of Jesus: the home of Mary and Martha, the room in which Lazarus died and was brought back to life, the Praetorium where Jesus had to stand trial before Pilate and Herod, and where he was whipped, and so on. The process of inviting people to visit such a remarkable 'theme park' was also a way of inviting people to reflect on what makes solidarity strong and community real. It could make a valuable project for a reasonable creative artistic family with children feeling uninvolved in life during the lockdown weeks, to produce their own Varallo set of scenes from the gospels, or at least the houses and other settings such as the River Jordan where John baptised Jesus, cut out from cereal boxes perhaps. Franciscan communities in a few places in the United States have built chapels on the model of that first gathering place, the San Damiano chapel in Assisi, with its external artwork which shows the Annunciation scene.

The stories of the life, encounters and main events from the life of St. Francis are quite widely available. Reading various passages from them in groups would be a worthwhile exercise in understanding how the Christian call to celebrate the resurrection is also a call to create and nurture communities. Our own sense of mission, bringing peace, joy and compassion out into society, can deepen through a reflection on what has motivated previous generations of Christians. Anyone with a talent in photography could put together images of the stained glass windows in St. Thomas's Church along with the different images of the windows in St. Anthony's Church, formerly a Franciscan community focus, and add some texts which correspond, to make a lovely website for meditation on the mission which Pope Francis has encouraged for us in his writings. It would be a mission that includes respect for the environment around us, which includes announcing peace in places where people are suffering from the effects of war and hunger.

Some of our friars at St. Thomas's, Woodford, especially Fr. Austin and Fr. Quentin (who are also Brother Austin and Brother Quentin, since that is what 'friar' means), have moving memories of the solidarity of VE Day, especially of the street parties which took place that day, and the happiness of ending war. But further community building afterwards has always meant forming better collaborations with local people whenever possible. Applying our imaginations to the processes of sharing faith and hope is a key factor in bringing real community experiences to life. There are still many people in society around us who experience too easily that sense of 'how embarrassing this is', when there is some prospect of getting to discover a deeper level, by sharing the strength we gain from God, for instance. Yet this is how our inner being becomes a source of love and mercy, of conversion and liberation from fears. As we recover from the threatening virus, the changed outlook will involve us all in a search for new possible relationships: ways of living with integrity. We shall need the practice of imagining how we can find the best employment for ourselves and perhaps for others ...

Of course, this includes 'Stay Safe' and 'Stay at Home' guidelines for several more weeks. ☩

Reflection on the Feast of Pentecost . . . May 2020

Br Peter

*"All these joined in continuous prayer, together with several women, including Mary the mother of Jesus"
(Acts of the Apostles 1:14.)*

This is one of the few times when Mary is referred to after the crucifixion. She was there at the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and disciples and was present at the foundation of the community of the church.

Do we ever realise the impact the Holy Spirit had on the assembled gathering? Although we are hopefully, committed Christians and have received the Sacrament of Confirmation, we are far from realising the gifts, graces and the glory of this Sacrament in our daily lives. Without it there would be no "church", or "communities of faith" today. From being "unlettered" and "semi-literate" fishermen, the Apostles and disciples, both men and women, went out to convert and convince everyone they encountered, about the truth of Jesus Christ as their Saviour. They were given strange gifts—among them, the gift of tongues enabling them to speak the different languages of at least fifteen nations present there in Jerusalem – and nothing was "lost in translation". Over 3,000 people were converted on that day. What an event, and what a beginning!

Nowadays no-one likes to see a job half-done. An employer or householder values the artisan who completes the work thoroughly. However it was not the same with Christ!

He left the work half-finished, or really only just begun. He promised to send another Person or co-worker who would complete the unfinished work. That person or Force was the Holy Spirit, the Power of Love behind the throne of God.

This inspirer would curtail the timidity, the paralysing fear and the petrifying anxiety of the followers of Jesus and give them energy, vigour and clarity in their message of Evangelism. They became different men and women unafraid of the Caesars of this world.

We know the rest is history: how they sailed and travelled the known and unknown world to find people in need of conversion. They were no longer afraid, but were empowered to bring the light of Christ to all those they met with, often resulting in their own persecution and martyrdom.

Could it be that as Christians we are more afraid of the Power of the Spirit in our lives than we are of the world around us.

"COME HOLY SPIRIT, FILL THE HEARTS OF YOUR FAITHFUL
AND KINDLE IN US THE FIRE OF YOUR LOVE."




The Parish Office

Geraldine Mansbridge

The parish office is here to provide a service to our church community. Therefore, you can imagine when faced with the lockdown rules and social distancing requirements in March this put us in a bit of a dilemma. How could we continue to provide a service when we have three staff in a relatively small office, it's only just over 20 square metres. Staff were in good health and showing no symptoms so we speedily decided that we would put into effect the new social distancing requirements whilst protecting the staff and enabling them to maintain a service to you. Therefore, a new working pattern commenced, in essence this was that only one person should be in the office each working day between 9.30am and 1.30pm to cover telephone calls and emails; our other tasks e.g. a review of our data base, were undertaken from home. On some occasions, when worked demanded it two members of staff were allowed. The Friars also had to maintain the 2m social distancing rule!"

We have continued to provide Mass cards albeit our windows became our new counter; we received and passed on information from those who were in need and those who were available to assist. We felt it was important to continue with STOC weekly newsletter, as this was our way of reaching out and keeping in touch so that when we all come back together there will be feeling of still being part of a community.

The service we provide is here and waiting for you to return, we miss the activity that the Church and Becket Centre generates, we miss your smiling faces, we miss the activity that the Church and Becket Centre generates. Stay Safe. 

Web Resources

Mike Eggleton

On the parish website homepage if you look along the top menu on the site and go to **Schools** then here you will find a list of schools within the parish. The last item along on the menu is **More** and within this category is listed the various other programmes and activities within the parish which have not been covered elsewhere.

On the homepage you can also find a link to watch live mass being streamed on Sunday mornings at 10am during the lockdown. If you are unable to view mass at this time then scrolling further down on the homepage you can find the icon **Mass Online**. Clicking on this will enable you to be able to view the recording of the Sunday mass once it has been uploaded.

You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter (details in the section below).

- St. Thomas Parish Website: <http://www.stthomaswoodford.org>
- The Prayer App: Pray with the Pope – ‘Click to Pray’ prayer app – available on Android and iOS.
- Steward of the Gospel – The Vision Document and other documents related to our Parish Partnership are available on our website. To view go to:
<https://www.stthomaswoodford.org/steward-of-the-gospel>
- Parish Facebook: [@STOCWoodford](https://www.facebook.com/STOCWoodford)
- Parish Twitter: [@STOCWoodford](https://twitter.com/STOCWoodford)
- Pope Francis at the Vatican: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>
- Follow Pope Francis on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/Pontifex>
- The Art of Dying Well - what does the church say about death?
<http://www.artofdyingwell.org/>
- Order of Friars Minor in Great Britain: <http://www.friar.org/home>