



# Daily Bible Notes

## Lent 2009

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## Wednesday 25 February 2009

*Ash Wednesday*

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust

Why not go outside and stick your hands into the soil. Really get them dirty. Smell the earth. Rub it between your hands. It's dirt, earth, raw stuff.

The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

**1 Corinthians 15:47-49**

Is it just stuff? We are made from the same 'dust'. We are earthy creatures. And that's nothing to worry about. Like Adam, the first man, we were created out of the earth. One day, though, we will return to the earth. On Ash Wednesday we remember that we are but dust and to dust we will return. In the face of that unglamorous fact we turn our faces towards Jesus Christ. We turn to him in penitence – in sorrow for all the times that we have turned our faces away from him and concentrated only on earthly things.

But there's more. That dirt on your hands is soil. It is organic and fruitful. In it things can grow and live. It isn't just 'dirt'. Earth can bring forth glory.

Jesus is the man from heaven. He too was like us, made of earth. But Jesus also points us to something heavenly. Jesus the man is also Jesus our God. In Jesus we see that we are not just earthy. Perhaps we can hope that by his grace he will make us more than creatures of dust. Perhaps we can hope that we will bear his image and be like him. Today, the day of dust and ashes, that seems so absurd but perhaps, perhaps...

### Prayer

Merciful Father,  
turn us from sin to faithfulness and from disobedience to love,  
and prepare us, through penitence, self-examination and attention to your word, to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ our Saviour. Amen.

## Thursday 26 February 2009

Don't hold your breath

Maybe Lent hasn't come at a good time. Maybe you feel run down and in need of a little help. Maybe you're just plain exhausted and feel as if the wind has been knocked out of you. So just take a moment to concentrate for a while on your breathing. Breathe out and breathe in. Out and in.

The Lord is the everlasting God... He does not faint or grow weary... He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

**Isaiah 40:28-31**

Lent is a time for waiting on God. As the prophet Isaiah proclaims, God will strengthen and empower us. That's who God is. He does not weary. He is everlastingly full of Spirit. And he is a God who gives his strength to us. Lent is a time to blow out all that distracts us and wearies us. It is a time to breathe in the emboldening Spirit and to be inspired (meaning to have life breathed into us) and enthused (meaning to be inspired by God).

This is a time of renewal and transformation as once again we take stock of where we are. We take time out to focus on what matters. We wait on God and listen to his promise to renew our strength. We let God blow away the cobwebs. Lent is a spiritual spring clean.

Read again the passage from Isaiah and be attentive to who God is and what God promises to do.

God promises to share his life, his abundant life, with us. He strengthens. He empowers. He shall give us wings. Breathe out all that distracts and detracts from God. Breathe in the Spirit he sends to us. Breathe out and breathe in. Out and in.

### Prayer

Lord, our strength is in you.

Mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Friday 27 February 2009

### Dressing Up

Sometimes we can hide behind the clothes we wear. Think of phrases like 'mutton dressed as lamb' or 'a wolf in sheep's clothing'. They suggest that appearances can be deceptive.

Sometimes how we dress says something about who we are. Many people wear uniforms – the police, judges, chefs, priests. Uniforms can be ceremonial and/or practical but they all say something about who the person wearing it is and what they do. Dressing up can also make you feel better about who you are. You might dress up to go out, to 'feel a million dollars' or to give a good impression.

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

**Ephesians 4:22-24**

St Paul reminds us that we have been taught to divest ourselves of an old way of life. He counsels us to put away our old self. In Lent we make ourselves naked before God. He can see what we are like underneath all our pretensions anyway. He sees behind all the barriers we put up to present an image to the world.

But then Paul reminds us that we have been taught to clothe ourselves anew. We put on a whole new self. Having peeled away our old self with its lusts – with all those desires which are unhealthy and not focussed on God – we put on our real self. We vest ourselves with the person we were created to be; created in the image of God. That is the image God wants us to present to the world. Inside and out we are called to be godly.

Let us pray for God's renewal of all that we are. Let us pray that this Lent we will grow into our new clothes!

### Prayer

Lord, forgive what I have been, sanctify what I am and order what I shall be. Amen.

## Saturday 28 February 2009

### Becoming Divine

Have you ever encountered goodness that is tangible – so real that you felt you could trip over it? It will probably be goodness found in a person – a Mother Teresa, an Oscar Schindler, a Maximilian Kolbe, a living saint in your life. It is in people like these that God's goodness is so real you feel that you can reach out and touch it. In them, God is made present. God shows us something of who he is through them and their lives. That's what makes a saint. A saint is someone through whom God shows us who he is.

God's divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature.

**2 Peter 1:3-4**

Perhaps you don't feel like much of a saint yourself. In fact, most people who think they are saints probably aren't very good ones! Peter knew all about falling short of sainthood. In this letter, however, Peter tells us how each one of us can become a saint. It is God who gives us all we need for life and for being saintly.

Jesus came and shared our human life and showed us his glory and his goodness. Jesus calls us to share in his godly life. If we lay hold of God's promise that we can share in his life, in his glory and his goodness, then we can leave behind all our false desires and hopes (our lusts). If we are like Jesus then we too can share in his divine nature. We can be godly. We can ourselves be so like God that others will find him in us.

Imagine that. Imagine God working through us to reveal himself to others. Imagine being called to be a saint. Remember: with God all things are possible. Lent is a time to lay hold of God's promises.

### Prayer

Almighty God, grant that as Jesus came to share in his humanity, so we may share the life of his divinity. Amen.

## Sunday 1 March 2009

### *The First Sunday of Lent*

Worship – Holy moments!

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a burning bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.'

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am.'

'Don't come any closer,' God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.'

**Exodus 3:1-5**

Have you ever been in a desert? If not, maybe you have visited one of those wonderful beaches where there is a vast expanse of sand as far as the eye can see. That is where I imagine Moses was in our reading – surrounded by sand. There he had a strange experience: he saw what appeared to be a burning bush that wasn't burning! He turned aside to take a closer look. Well, wouldn't you?

Now, God had Moses' attention and was able to speak to him. Are we sometimes so busy with our 'stuff' that God has to take unusual action to attract us, stop us, so he can engage with us?

"Take your shoes off, Moses," God told him, "that place where you are standing is holy ground!"

Holy ground? But surely, the bit of sand Moses was standing on looked exactly like the rest of the sand he could see, so what made it holy? God was there – that made it holy.

Have there been holy places in your spiritual journey, holy times when God has been especially real to you? Maybe if we slowed down a little more often we might just enjoy a few more holy moments.

### Prayer

Father God, our lives are often so busy, and we are concerned about so much "stuff". Help us to slow down, to take time, and so enjoy holy moments with you. Amen.

## Monday 2 March 2009

Worship – The "wow" factor!

When did you last experience the "wow" factor? Maybe you were out walking in the country, turned a corner and there was an amazing panoramic view – "wow"! Or perhaps you were listening to some music which you found overwhelmingly emotional – "wow"! But what about worship in church? Read on.

All the priests who were there had consecrated themselves, regardless of their divisions.

All the Levites who were musicians... stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets.

The trumpeters and singers joined in unison, as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the LORD. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang: "He is good; his love endures for ever".

Then the temple of the LORD was filled with a cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple of God.

**2 Chronicles 5:11-14**

The occasion was the consecration of the newly completed Temple, a project overseen by King Solomon. It was a magnificent building, lavishly kitted out (you can read the details in the previous chapters). When all was ready, the service began: the musicians played, the choir sang and something quite amazing apparently happened. The writer described it as a cloud filling the place; a reporter today might say "you could cut the air with a knife!" Had we been there we might have responded (with more conviction than we sometimes have): "The Lord is here, his Spirit is with us!" – and we might just have added: "Wow!"

I reckon those who were there that day went away knowing they had met with the living God in their worship.

Do we, should we, expect the "wow" factor in our worship today? What might you do to make encounter with God more possible?

### Prayer

Lord, when we come in worship, help us to be open to you, to expect really to meet with you. Amen.

## Tuesday 3 March 2009

### Worship – Leading to action

....I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. [The seraphs] were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."  
Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."  
Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" **Isaiah 6:1,3,5-8**

This is a familiar passage, if only because it includes the angel song which we say (or sing) as part of the Eucharistic Prayer in our Communion Services. But take a closer look, and note that there is a process in worship implied here: that worship is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end.

Isaiah's vision begins with an overwhelming awareness of God, his greatness and his holiness. This makes him all too aware of his own unworthiness and sinfulness and he cries out to God in his need. As the vision continues one of the seraphs touches his lips with a live coal: symbolically, his sin and guilt are dealt with. Then he hears God's voice calling for volunteers: "Whom shall I send?" And Isaiah volunteers: "Here I am. Send me!"

Worship leads to repentance and renewal, and action for God. And this is the recurring pattern that should shape all our worship, individual and corporate. It certainly shapes our liturgy: we come to worship, we confess our sins and are forgiven, we receive the tokens of God's renewing love (bread and wine), and we are sent out in service.

What we do together in church, let us also do personally in our own time with God.

### Prayer

Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.

## Wednesday 4 March 2009

### Worship – Actions speak louder than words

Have you ever wondered what God really thinks of the worship in your church on a Sunday morning? Inspiring? Boring?

God's people in Old Testament times didn't have that problem: they knew what God thought of their worship because the prophets told them. Take the days of Amos, for example.

I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!  
**Amos 5:21,23-24**

The problem was not mainly with their worship. God was more concerned about the broader agenda, the social context in which they worshipped – and that left a lot to be desired! However 'good' their worship was, if they neglected others more important things like justice, then God was not interested in their worship.

If there were an Amos around today what would he give as God's verdict on our worship? For Amos' contemporaries the criticism became more specific. Read on.

In that day, declares the Sovereign LORD, the songs in the temple will turn to wailing.  
Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat? – skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales.  
**Amos 8:4-5**

Doesn't that sound very contemporary? It is a cry for integrity and consistency. In other words, it is a challenge to be Christian not just at worship on Sunday, but at work or play on Monday – and Tuesday, and Wednesday...

### Prayer

"Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise Thee" (George Herbert). Lord, let that be true of me. Amen.

## Thursday 5 March 2009

Worship – Offering the best

If I am a father, where is the honour due to me? If I am a master, where is the respect due to me? says the LORD Almighty. It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name. But you ask, "How have we shown contempt for your name?"

When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you? says the LORD Almighty.

Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you, says the LORD Almighty, and I will accept no offering from your hands.

Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king, says the LORD Almighty, and my name is to be feared among the nations.

**Malachi 1:6-8,10,14**

There were strict rules governing animal sacrifice in the Temple. The animals used were supposed to be males in their prime, with no defect whatsoever. Through the prophet Malachi God challenged both priests and people about their attitude: they were bringing second-rate animals for sacrifice which was totally unacceptable.

We may not sacrifice animals any more (thank God for that!), but is our attitude in worship any different? Are we guilty of trying to fob God off with second best in worship? What about our personal approach to the worship of God – do we give him our best time and energy, or simply what is left when we have done other things? What about our corporate worship in church – do we plan it, work at it, rehearse it, so that it can be the very best that we can offer? Or are we more like the people of Malachi's day, saying, in effect, "that'll do!"

It may "do" for us, but clearly it won't "do" for God!

### Prayer

Lord, forgive us when we only give to you what's left of our time and energy. Help us always to give you our best. Amen.

## Friday 6 March 2009

Worship – Meeting with God

Many of the first Christians were familiar with the patterns of worship we find in the Old Testament, not least the worship of the Temple. It is not surprising, therefore, that the early Christian leaders often used the imagery and symbolism of Temple worship in their teaching. Take Paul, for example:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

**Ephesians 2:19-22**

A powerful image: we are like stones being built together to create a fine building – and not any old building, but a place of worship. It is a building in which God lives, where he can be met and known.

Have you ever visited a church (perhaps on holiday) and as you go in and move around, somehow you sense this is a place of worship, somehow you know God is there? That is how it should be as people come amongst us, God's people (the real church!). As they meet us and engage with us and share with us they should sense: "God is really among you!" (1 Corinthians 14:25).

Peter agrees with Paul:

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

**1 Peter 2:5**

Someone has said: "Before the church preaches good news it needs to be good news". The Church isn't always good news in the media, but the challenge for us is to counteract that and be good news for all who come, a living Temple where they meet God.

### Prayer

"For I'm building a people of power... that will move through this land by my Spirit, and will glorify my precious name". Amen.

## Saturday 7 March 2009

Worship – The music of heaven

And they sang a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!”

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

The four living creatures said, “Amen”, and the elders fell down and worshipped.

**Revelation 5:9-14**

We can know little of what heaven will be like, but here and there in the Bible are hints, glimpses, not least in the book of Revelation. The glimpse we have in chapters 4 and 5 is of worship, of numerous persons (variously referred to as creatures, elders and angels) totally absorbed in the worship of God and of “the Lamb”.

Revelation was probably written to Christians who were experiencing terrible persecution for their faith under the Romans. Here they are being reminded that despite everything God is there, unchanging in his power and love, and that they belong to him because of what Jesus (the Lamb) has achieved. This glimpse was an encouragement to them to ‘hang in’ and even to join in the worship.

It is certainly true that through the years of Christian history many in times of difficulty have found worship to be a source of strength. It doesn't change things, it doesn't take the pain away, but somehow it gives help, resource to cope with the circumstances. Is that true for you?

### Prayer

Lord, when things get tough, give me a vision of heaven, of your power and love and of all you have done for me in Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Sunday 8 March 2009

*The Second Sunday of Lent*

Pastoral Care – a great gift

From the very earliest days of its life the Church has existed in order to present Jesus and his importance to the world. For this to be possible different people were given different types of leadership. This, of course, is as true today as it was then.

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

**Ephesians 4:11-12**

When we read these verses we are reminded that the gift of being a pastor is right up there in a place of importance in the list of gifts which God has given to the Church. (You might like to look up a similar list of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12: 28).

A pastor is a shepherd, and this indicates that the local church is like a flock of sheep. The pastor has responsibility to feed and to lead the flock in such a way that they are equipped for carrying out the work of the church themselves. The Church does not appoint a leader to be the sole pastor in the Church – the only shepherd of the flock. By working in a pastoral way it is intended that people will follow his/her example and be inspired to do some caring and feeding, supporting and protecting themselves. As this happens more people become inspired by the work and example of the pastors and start to join in with this God given, life changing work. When people minister to one another in this way they grow in faith and in love. The evidence of this spiritual growth is being *Christlike*.

When this happens the Church really is presenting Jesus and his importance to the world.

Who are the pastors in your church?

In what ways are they equipping others for this important work?

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd who always cares for the sheep. Give to us that same love which never abandons, never lets go and never gets fed up of caring for one another. Amen.

## Monday 9 March 2009

Following the example of Jesus

For all Christians Jesus is our example, our role model and our inspiration. Yesterday we thought about him as the pastor and shepherd, and today we think about that same shepherd as the servant.

Jesus, well aware that the Father had entrusted everything to him, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from the table, laid aside his garments, and taking a towel, tied it round him. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with a towel. **John 13:3-5**

The disciples must have been very shocked when they saw their Master rise from the supper table, wrap a towel around his waist, take a basin of water and start to wash their feet. It was a menial task and here was Jesus doing it himself.

Jesus knew that there was a competitive spirit in the hearts of his disciples. In fact within a few minutes of this taking place, they were squabbling about which of them was the greatest. By washing their feet in this way he gave them an amazing lesson in humility and he also, through his actions, rebuked their selfishness and their pride.

The Father had entrusted his Son with so much and yet he took up a towel and basin! This humility did not come out of poverty and inadequacy but out of riches and supremacy. He was rich but he became poor.

If our real desire is to do the Father's will then we will experience the joy of following Christ's example and serving the needs of others. He was the pastor, the shepherd, but also the servant and the King.

So often the church is filled with a sense of competition and criticism as believers vie with one another to see who is the greatest. Jesus served his disciples in humility and love. This humility and love is the essence of pastoral care in the church.

What kinds of tasks in the church today remind you of Jesus with this towel and basin?

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us to value and treasure the privilege of serving others. Give us the humility and the love which you showed to your disciples in the Upper Room. Amen.

## Tuesday 10 March 2009

Who are we helping?

When we are caring for people in need, we can find ourselves doing some very small and apparently insignificant jobs. Today, as we think back to the example that was given by Jesus in yesterday's verses, we also remember that however small the task we may be called upon to do for a needy person, we are working for Him.

I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.

The righteous then will answer him, "When lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ... .. The king will reply, I tell you whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me!" **Matthew 25:35-40**

In every parish, neighbourhood and community there are people in need. Their needs vary tremendously. For many people their hunger and thirst is for actual food and drink. For the homeless their great need is for actual warmth and shelter. For other people their hunger and thirst may be for acceptance, affirmation, encouragement, friendship, and the warmth and shelter which they need may be the warmth and shelter of security and belonging. Even though their needs vary so much the thing which is the same is that we have opportunities for serving people in need *everywhere*.

When we meet people in need we meet them face to face for who they are. It is an encounter of one human being with another. To think of it in any other way would make the needy person faceless and nameless. However we must never underestimate the value of such care and support. Today's verses tell us that whenever we help a person in need we are helping Jesus himself.

When you last needed a good neighbour was there someone there to help you? Think for a moment about the opportunities for helping those in need that have come to you these last few weeks.

### Prayer

Lord God your world is full of opportunities for serving the needs of others. Open my eyes to see those opportunities and open my heart to want to say YES. Amen

## Wednesday 11 March 2009

Caring as encouragement – encouragement as care!

As we think about pastoral care this week we are thinking about the practical ways in which the church is doing the work of Jesus. He is the Head of the Church and we are His Body here on Earth.

Be at peace among yourselves. We urge you, our brothers, warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

**1 Thess 5:13b-15**

Get along among yourselves... Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs.

**1 Thess 5:13b-15**

Pastoral care is the Gospel in action. Paul identifies those who are in need of special care and attention. The word which is used for “idle” (or in some translations “lazy”) really means quitter. The phrase could read “Warn the quitters”. The paraphrase “The Message” refers to them as “the stragglers”. Every church has its quitters and its stragglers – those who are faint hearted and those who always fear the worst.

William Barclay’s translation uses the lovely phrase “Cling to the weak”. What a lovely piece of advice! Paul is trying to help these Christians to encourage their weaker brothers and sisters to be brave. It is all too easy for people to drift away and then vanish from the church altogether. These verses encourage us to make a deliberate attempt to encourage people and to prevent them from slipping away. Building bonds of love and fellowship, care and support can prevent people from straying.

This kind of care is different from what we have thought about in the last couple of days, but it is all part of our experience of being a caring church which reflects the values of the Kingdom of God.

Have you ever been a quitter or a straggler? What has brought you back?

Are you aware of someone who is struggling in this way right now? How can they be helped?

Prayer

Lord God, you long to draw all people to yourself. Help me to stay close to you at all times and help me to encourage others when they want to drift away. Amen.

## Thursday 12 March 2009

Who do we care for?

As we have thought about different kinds of pastoral care over the last few days we have realized that caring for the needy is an integral part of the Christian life.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

**James 1:27**

The letter of James is a very practical letter. When we think about pastoral care we are thinking about very practical matters. James is telling the early Christians that it really does matter how we live. He goes so far as to say that we can tell whether someone’s faith is real or not by the way in which they behave. Real faith in Christ always spills over into the rest of our lives. It affects our attitude to ourselves as well as our attitude to others and to the whole of life. James says that there should be no discrepancy between our beliefs and our actions.

It is really easy to let things slip. It is really easy for the standards and values of the world to squeeze us into their mould. The early Christians needed the letter of James and so do we!

A Christian discovers God’s standards and then lives them out. This means that, among other things, we care for the needy. James particularly mentions the orphans and the widows as being the especially vulnerable people of that day.

Who do you consider to be the most vulnerable people in your community today?

Who is caring for them? Who is without any care?

Prayer

Lord God, we often use so many words to describe our Faith. Please help me to ensure that my faith in You never stops at words. Help me always to act it out. Amen.

## Friday 13 March 2009

### Everyone matters

Today we stay in the little letter of James as we think further about the motivation from within the faith for our pastoral care of all in need.

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or a sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food the one of you says to them: "Go in peace, be warmed, be filled" without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. **James 2:14-17**

When you cross the border from Yorkshire into Lancashire there is a county sign which says "Lancashire – the county where everyone matters". That is a commendable but bold statement! Because, of course, if we recognise that people matter, then we must meet their needs. We can only ignore people's needs when we think that they are not important.

A priority in all our primary schools is the Every Child Matters Agenda. This too is a very commendable but very demanding agenda. When the importance of someone is acknowledged then their needs have to be taken seriously.

As Christians we believe that every person is of the highest value and importance because each of us is made in the image of God and is loved by God. If we acknowledge the importance of everyone – with no exceptions – then we cannot ignore the situations of the needy, whatever they may be.

Some churches can give the impression that they exist for people from a particular social background or a particular age. This does not reflect the inclusivity of the Kingdom of God. If everyone is important to God then everyone must also matter to the Church.

How is your church trying to meet the different needs of different people? In what ways can your church show that every person matters?

### Prayer

Lord God, help me to achieve a balance of faith and action, word and deed. Help me to value and reach out to those in need, knowing that they are all special to you. Amen.

## Saturday 14 March 2009

### The right kind of help

Help of the right kind at the right time is crucial, but inappropriate help at the wrong time can bring about needs all of its own.

Help to carry one another's burdens and in so doing you will obey the law of Christ. ... For every one has to carry their own load.

**Galatians 6:2,5**

There is an apparent contradiction in these two verses which leads us into some interesting thinking. They were written about the different ways in which legalists and Christians might tackle the problem of someone who has gone astray. They also have some challenging ideas for us about the ways in which we help people in need.

You know that, if you break a bone, it is important to get it set and plastered so that it can heal properly. You also know that the setting process can be very painful and healing takes time. A person whose life has been broken by need or circumstance is like a broken bone in the body of Christ. They need a lot of support for complete healing to take place. This can be very painful and can take a long time. The aim is that, however long it takes, the person will eventually be well enough to cope without the support provided during their crisis.

This says a lot to us about our attitude to pastoral care. We are there to help people in their need and to support them in times of hardship and loss. BUT we are also mindful of not creating a dependence which does not help them or us. Such long term leaning on another does not help people discover the fulfilment and potential which is God's plan for us all.

When can help become a hindrance and when does pastoral care become pastoral smothering?

### Prayer

Lord, you want us all to stand on our own feet and to walk in your ways. Help me to know when it is right to offer help and when to withdraw it. Amen.

## Sunday 15 March 2009

### *The Third Sunday of Lent*

#### Growing into God – Like newborn infants

In popular culture words like spirit and spiritual can conjure up images of things that are ghostly, spooky, supernatural or ethereal. The word 'spiritual' refers to things that might be real but appear less than solid.

Sometimes 'spirituality' is used to mean the part of your life dedicated to things that aren't worldly or mundane. It's a special compartment in us which we keep separate from things like eating, cleaning the toilet or watching television.

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

**1 Peter 2:2-3**

We might wonder if Peter also thinks that growing spiritually is an other-worldly task. We are to long for *spiritual* milk, not 'real' milk.

But the image Peter uses is very real and down to earth. If you watch a baby feeding on milk then you begin to sense just how strong and gut-felt is the desire Peter is talking about. For a baby, feeding is an all-consuming passion. They dedicate themselves totally to the task!

To long to be fed by God so that we can grow strong in our spiritual life has nothing airy-fairy about it. "If you have tasted what the Lord gives then you know it tastes good and so", says Peter, "long for it – desire it with every ounce of your being. Let that longing pervade every part of your life."

Do you feel that your spiritual life has come unmoored from the rest of your life? Does your desire for God reach into all the areas of your life? Are there things you could do to let your spirituality out of the box?

#### Prayer

Lord, teach us to love you with all that we are and to let you into every area of our lives. Amen.

## Monday 16 March 2009

#### Growing into God – Heaven in ordinary

'Ex-Soap Star New Boyfriend Exclusive', 'Model Drug Scandal', 'Bad Hair Day for Oscar Winner'. Another celebrity caught drunk, in a not-so-flattering pose, supporting a charity, in love, in rehab. Popularity is fragile and fleeting and its rewards are, as the headlines show, in the end few.

Jesus said, 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

**Matthew 6:5-6**

Jesus does not buy into celebrity culture. Those who parade their virtues and their religious status receive very short shrift indeed. The reason is not just that a lack of humility is vulgar and a bit embarrassing to watch. In the end, it shows a lack of real spiritual maturity. If you think that a relationship with God is all about kudos and public acclaim then Jesus is suggesting that you have missed the point.

Instead, Jesus counsels us to go into the privacy and normality of our own room to pray. It allows a focus on God and strips away all the longing for a popularity that will be short-lived. Real rewards can come when we spend time searching for the God who is in secret. The rewards of setting out on a journey to seek God cannot be surpassed.

Why? In the quiet of our room we can give to God all that is wonderfully ordinary and mundane – we offer him our most basic desires and fears, our hopes and our needs. And the reward is finding that God will reveal himself in the smallest things. Heaven is not found in celebrity. Prayer, as the poet-priest George Herbert said, is all about 'heaven in ordinary'.

#### Prayer

Heavenly Father, may we find the reward that comes through seeking you: the reward of finding that you have always been there in the most ordinary parts of life. Amen.

## Tuesday 17 March 2009

Growing into God – Two's company...

If you go on holiday with someone then you really get to know them. If you work closely with people then perhaps you find yourself picking up their bad habits. It's when you start to live with someone that you really find out what they are like. It makes sense. If you spend time with people or invest time in them then a relationship grows which affects you both.

Now when Jesus heard about [the death of John the Baptist] he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

**Matthew 14:13**

Jesus is mourning the death of his cousin and he wants somewhere to be alone and to pray. He wants to be near his Father. In this case two would be company and three is literally a crowd.

Jesus wants to escape, he wants to be alone with his Father. He wants to spend time with him and simply to be in his presence.

The more time we invest in God by spending time with him will mean that our knowledge of him will be so much deeper. Our relationship with him will grow. Like Abraham, we might find that we become a friend of God (Isaiah 41.8, James 2.23).

The time we spend in God's presence will mean that his character, his nature, will rub off on us. We will be transformed by the strength of our relationship. No friend leaves us untouched.

Jesus does not have his time alone. The crowds arrive and need him. But Jesus' reaction is not frustration. As a human and yet divine, his reaction is compassion and he goes to cure them and feed them.

### Prayer

Father, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. As we rest in your presence, transform us into the likeness of your Son, our friend and Saviour, that we may love others as you love us. Amen.

## Wednesday 18 March 2009

Growing into God – All together now...

Enjoying music seems to have become a more lonely experience. If you wanted you could carry your entire music collection around in your back pocket. Plug yourself into an iPod and enjoy your music anywhere anytime. Plug in and tune everything else out. People rarely sing together any more. For that reason the hymns people choose for weddings usually hark back to the last time they sang together – at school!

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

**Colossians 3:15-16**

Spirituality is about a relationship with God. Yet it is not only about a personal relationship with God, however crucial that is. We can't just plug in and tune everyone else out. In the Old Testament God calls an entire people to be his own.

This doesn't change in the New Testament. God calls a people to be his own, although now he has extended his call to all the peoples of the world. He calls us to be one body, ruled by his peace. As a people we should have the word of Christ living in us so that we can teach and correct one another wisely.

We are to be a thankful people and together we should engage in singing, praising and worshipping. It is not just about everyone doing their own thing. It is not just me plugging in a pair of headphones to receive my own personal spiritual experience. Spirituality is as much about growing together as it is about a personal journey of spiritual growth. This is Good News! It is always easier to share a journey.

### Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, who said to your apostles, 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you': look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church and grant it the peace and unity of your kingdom; where you are alive and reign now and for ever. Amen.

## Thursday 19 March 2009

*St Joseph of Nazareth*

Growing into God – Order, Order!

In the lift there is 'muzak' playing. Music blares out of shops at you. The clubs are so loud you can't make yourself heard. You're sitting in the restaurant under the speaker. People are shouting at one another in the market. The politicians in the Commons drown one another out. Wherever you go you just can't hear yourself think, let alone communicate.

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. ... For God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

**1 Corinthians 14:26-27, 33**

So imagine if you went into church and you couldn't hear each other pray. What if everyone's prayers seemed to be competing? What if it was all a game of spiritual one-upmanship? Would you want to come back?

It is right for us to open ourselves to God and to be enthusiastic about our spiritual life. But anyone who has watched over a children's party knows that enthusiasm can easily turn into disorder and chaos. It can be the same in the church.

Paul is adamant that too much unbridled enthusiasm is the result of too much attention to oneself. If we all go our own way then we're not going to get too far. Instead, everything we do should be about building each other up; about helping each other to grow into God. We want everyone to have the benefit of seeing God at work in others.

How can we help each other grow into God in our church? How can we build others up? How can we be attentive to God working in others?

### Prayer

God of peace and order, help us to curb our personal enthusiasms and be attentive to others so that we can hear you speaking through them. Amen.

## Friday 20 March 2009

Growing into God - Going through the motions?

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

**Psalm 51:15-17**

The song-writer, the Psalmist, knows that God is not interested in empty rituals. If there is no real sorrow or contrition for what we have done wrong then a confession is more than useless. God will not delight in it. If we go through the motions and think that is enough then we will be disappointed.

God desires for us to open ourselves to him. We should be honest about our inability to save ourselves from who we are. We can never pull ourselves up by our own boot-straps. We need help. We need God. And if we come to him in that spirit then he can work with us. There's not much he can do until we acknowledge our need of his aid. That's why a broken spirit is delightful – it leads to transformation.

But what about those times when we come to pray and it does feel like we're going through the motions? We just don't feel like it. We say the words but they don't seem to take. It's all in one ear and out the other.

It's not ideal, of course, but at least we've turned up. Perhaps try saying a set form of prayers like Morning Prayer (ask your parish priest if you want a copy) or maybe try using the simply form of Daily Prayer in this Transforming Lives pack. Let the words that you've been given to say roll over you. Maybe a phrase will stick in your mind or perhaps it will dislodge the fog. Not every spiritual encounter will be a fully engaged experience. So sometimes it is just about turning up. But we should always pray for a new spirit and ask God to open our lips. If anyone can do it, he can.

### Prayer

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me (Psalm 51:10). O Lord, open my lips so that my mouth might declare your praise however I feel today. Amen.

## Saturday 21 March 2009

### Growing into God – Heads up!

What is it today? Is it conspiracy theories based around another 'lost' gospel which seem to have caught the public attention? What is it that the newspapers tell us is the most important thing this week? Which so-called 'New Atheist' has written a book to bash the Bible-bashers? Who is today's flash in the pan? Who is the man/woman of the moment? Who are we going to let push us around today?

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

**Ephesians 4:14-16**

Paul wants us to give up following the latest fads because they don't last and they can lead us astray. His answer is that we should grow up. It isn't just that we should be a bit more mature and less childish. We grow up into Christ who is our head. He is our leader, our guide, our shepherd.

The church is a community but it is not just a lot of individuals. It is a body in which each part is equipped by Jesus and knit together. When it works properly it grows up as one body and it is built up by love. And so when it feels like the world is against us and we don't know where to turn, then let us turn to one another. Let us focus on love – of God and of neighbour – and then we will grow together into Christ who is the way, the truth and the life.

### Prayer

O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom: Defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Sunday 22 March 2009

### *Mothering Sunday (4th in Lent)*

### Evangelism begins at home

What have evangelism and Mothering Sunday got in common, you may well ask? Yet what more amazing privilege and responsibility could there be than to pass on our faith in Jesus to our children and grandchildren?

I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also ... and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures.

**2 Timothy 1:1-5, 3:15**

Evangelism begins at home. Sometimes those who are 'cradle Christians' can feel rather in the shade of those who come to faith later in life through a dramatic conversion experience. But what a privilege to grow up and be nurtured in an environment of faith from the very cradle. And what a privilege to be able to teach our children about Jesus and share Bible stories and prayers with them. That's a form of evangelism – and a very important one too.

Of course, it's not easy. There is no guarantee that our children will respond to our teaching and decide to follow Jesus themselves. That's the thing about parenthood – we're raising our children to be their own people – free agents making their own decisions. And they will be the first to spot any inconsistencies between what we profess and how we actually live – and point it out to us! But if we root the nurture of our children (or anyone for whom we have any form of responsibility) in prayer and seek to live out the Christian way in our daily life, then that gives them every opportunity and encouragement to choose to follow Christ – if not now, then at some later time.

### Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for those who nurtured me in the Christian faith.

Thank you for parents, grandparents, Sunday School teachers, clergy, teachers and evangelists. Help me, in my turn, to be faithful in passing on your gospel to those for whom I am responsible. Amen.

## Monday 23 March 2009

### Evangelism – The reason why

We often shy away from the 'E-word', perhaps because of unhappy connotations of televangelists and pressure selling. But the word simply means sharing the good news of what God has done – and here's why.

God loved the world so much that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

**John 3:16**

Notice that it doesn't say, "God loved the Church so much", or "God loved religious people so much". No, God loved the world so much that he gave his son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish.

The only possible motivation for evangelism is that there is good news for everyone, not just for us. If you know of some good news that affects another person, and you keep it to yourself, that's selfishness.

Someone once said that evangelism is "just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread". Jesus died for everyone, whether they know it or not, so that they might not die, but might have eternal life! Are we going to keep that to ourselves?

Who do you know among your friends and family that hasn't yet discovered this amazing truth? Begin by praying for them and holding them in your mind within that amazing love and grace of God. You might be surprised where it leads.

### Prayer

Lord, it is wonderful what you have done for us.  
Thank you for sending Jesus to live and die for me.  
And thank you that he didn't just die for me, but for everyone.

Help me to see who you might be calling me to share your good news with. And open their hearts to receive the message. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

## Tuesday 24 March 2009

### Evangelism – Jesus' charter

Evangelism is not just about trying to get people to come to Church. It's about following on where Jesus left off in proclaiming the Kingdom of God with its attendant promise of freedom and salvation for the whole world. Quite an ambition!

Then Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath he went as usual to the synagogue. He stood up to read the Scriptures and was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written,  
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people."

**Luke 4:16-20**

Jesus went on to say "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". The amazing truth is that he is himself the fulfilment of this wonderful prophecy. As he comes into lives and situations, he brings with him freedom and salvation. People's lives are transformed and society is changed.

This is not just pious theory: this is experience! Jesus has been changing lives and changing societies for 2000 years and he hasn't suddenly stopped now. There are countless stories of this happening. Perhaps you have experienced this change in your own life and have a story to tell. Perhaps, though, you don't feel this. In that case, the good news is that there's so much more for you to discover in the transforming power of Jesus. Today's prayer is for you.

### Prayer

Dear Lord, I've heard so much about what you have done in other people's lives, but I don't seem to have a story of my own. Please come into my life and bring your healing, your freedom and your peace. Change me. Set me free. So may I have a story to share that others might find you too and this world be changed a little bit more into your kingdom. Amen.

## Wednesday 25 March 2009

### Evangelism – Being good news

'What you do shouts so loud that I can't hear what you are saying.' The most powerful witness to Christ is a Christ-like life.

Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

**Colossians 4:5-6**

Grace is a wonderful word. It's a word that tells us the most important thing we need to know about God: that He shows undeserved love towards us. That's what grace means. It was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. God goes out of his way to save us from ourselves and our sin. Grace means acting towards others with love in a way that goes beyond anything they might deserve. It is the characteristic of God. It was the characteristic of the life of Jesus and it should be the characteristic of his followers.

Sadly, it isn't always so and that undermines our witness. Paul instructs the Colossians to ensure that their conversation is always full of grace, seasoned with salt, especially when dealing with 'outsiders' (those outside the Church, that is). What is your conversation like? Do you show grace to your colleagues at work, especially the irritating ones? Do you show grace to other members of your family, to your neighbours, to the people who serve you in shops or on the bus? The world is desperately short of grace, but if we can show it in our words and actions, that is a wonderful witness to the grace of God. We won't always get it right and we mustn't beat ourselves up when we fail – but when we do, we are good news!

### Prayer

Heavenly Father, I'm sorry for the times when I've not been very gracious. Forgive me, I pray, and help me to be a window into your grace.

Thank you that you are full of grace and do not deal with us as we deserve. Help me and all Christian people to show your grace in our dealings with others, that the world may come to know your grace and love. Amen.

## Thursday 26 March 2009

### Evangelism – Words are necessary

You've probably heard the words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: 'Preach the gospel – use words where necessary'. We know what he meant, but do we sometimes use this to justify our reluctance to name the name of Jesus? Are words not in fact necessary?

Have reverence for Christ in your hearts, and honour him as Lord. Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you.

**1 Peter 3:15-16**

It's important that our lives and actions demonstrate the love of Christ. We thought about that yesterday. But if we never speak about him explicitly, people will just think that we are nice. We want people to find life in Christ, not just feel warm feelings! It is his glory, not ours that we seek.

When did you last name the name of Jesus in a conversation (and I don't mean as a swear word!)? It is something we British are not very good at – even amongst our fellow Christians. But how are we going to 'explain the hope we have in us' without talking about Jesus our saviour and lord? We can't!

Why not make a conscious effort this week to talk about Jesus and what he has done in your life? Start with a fellow Christian – perhaps at Church on Sunday. It doesn't have to be forced or pious. The more we do it, the more natural it will become – and then we might find we are able to share something of what Jesus means to us with those outside the Church. Words are necessary!

### Prayer

'Jesus, name above all names, beautiful saviour, glorious Lord. Emmanuel, God is with us, blessed redeemer, living word'.

Lord, forgive me that I am so shy of mentioning your name.

You have done so much for me. Help me to honour you with my lips as well as in my life. Amen.

## Friday 27 March 2009

### Evangelism – Try stopping us!

The best evangelism of all springs out of a heart set on fire by the love of God and the power of his Holy Spirit.

Then the Sanhedrin called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

**Acts 4:18-20**

Just occasionally we have an experience that we can't stop telling people about. Perhaps it's the birth of a grandchild, a successful exam result, the engagement of one of our children, a job promotion or passing our driving test. Quite rightly, we want to share the good news with others. Sometimes, too, we have an experience of God like that. The apostles did. They had seen and experienced the power of God at work and nothing was going to stop them talking about it – not even a direct order from the authorities!

Wouldn't it be great if our churches were places where the love and the power of God were so evident that we just couldn't stop talking about it?

Wouldn't it be a refreshing change from the media stereotype of empty pews, dull worship and declining numbers? What can we do to make that happen? Can you do something? Well, it all starts with prayer. Why not ask God what he wants to do in your life and in your Church? And just imagine what might happen if we all pray like that!

### Prayer

'Give thanks to the Lord, proclaim his greatness; Tell the nations what he has done. Sing praise to the Lord; tell of the wonderful things he has done.'

Lord, I long for my life, and the life of my Church to be full of your life and power. Help me to see what I can do to make that happen and help me to be willing to make whatever changes in my life that might entail. Amen.

## Saturday 28 March 2009

### Evangelism – Powered by prayer

Before the day of Pentecost the disciples were a frightened and confused bunch of people unsure of what to do next. After they were filled with the Spirit they became bold witnesses to Christ and turned the world upside down.

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God boldly.

**Acts 4:31**

'After they prayed.' Of course, it could just be coincidence, but somehow I doubt it. It's amazing the difference prayer makes. But that should hardly surprise us. We believe in a living God who can do things way beyond our imagining and yet so often we struggle on trying to do things from our own resources alone. This is particularly so with evangelism. The most wonderfully thought out evangelistic strategy, the most imaginative mission programme will come to nothing without the work of the Holy Spirit. Only God's Spirit can open people's hearts and minds to understand and believe. And, while no doubt the Holy Spirit can work without our prayer, God seems in some way to tie his work in with our prayer.

Is there anyone you know who you would love to find Jesus? Have you made that a matter for prayer? Not just the occasional quick prayer, but repeated, persistent prayer. Why not pray specifically that you may find a suitable opportunity to share with them something of what Jesus means to you? Or that they might accept an invitation to the next Church event or special service? Keep praying until you see the answer. Sometimes it can take years, but God is faithful and will answer.

### Prayer

Heavenly Father, I bring (N) before you now. Thank you that you know them and love them and long for them to turn to you and find life. I pray that you would open their eyes to your reality.

Help me to have the words, lovingly spoken, that will help them on their journey. May I be open to what you may be doing in their life and ready to take any opportunities that may come my way. Amen.

## Sunday 29 March 2009

### *The Fifth Sunday of Lent*

#### Matthew 5:13 – Being Salt

It is not easy to be a dedicated Christian because our society is not a friend to God or to God's people. Christian values and attitudes are different from those of the world in which we live. So when the church is at work in a community it must make a difference.

You are salt to the world. And if salt becomes tasteless, how is its saltiness to be restored? It is now good for nothing but to be thrown away and trodden underfoot. **Matthew 5:13**

The man who invented potato crisps thought that he had had a really good idea but when the product was marketed it did not sell. He could not understand why people did not like his new idea. Then someone said "if only you would add a pinch of salt". He did, and that made all the difference. The crisps, plus salt, began to sell very well indeed. This was the beginning of the massive sales in potato crisps that are recorded today.

A little bit of salt makes all the difference! When we want to stress someone's worth and usefulness we sometimes say: "They are the salt of the earth".

Salt is also connected with purity, preserving and adding flavour. So if the Christian Church is to be like salt in the community it must be an example of purity and honesty. It must help to preserve things from corruption and it should bring life and vitality into the community. Sadly some people associate Christianity with exactly the opposite of all these things.

There is so much worry and depression around in the world but the Christian Church has a message that can bring flavour and sparkle. When this happens the Church becomes the salt of the earth.

If you want to fulfil your purpose as a Christian, you have to be the salt of the earth. What does this mean to you in practical ways?

#### Prayer

Lord Jesus you called us to be like salt. Help me to be honest and conscientious, pure in speech and in thought. Help me to have a good influence on my family and friends and to be one who brings joy today and always. Amen.

## Monday 30 March 2009

#### Lights in the World

The Christian working in the community makes a difference and he does so by being like Jesus. Jesus commanded us to be what he himself claimed to be – a light.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. **Matthew 5:14,15**

When Jesus said that he wanted us to be like lights in the world he was demanding nothing less than that we should be like him.

A light by its very nature has to be seen. In these energy saving days we never put on a light and then disappear for it to shine on its own. We put a light where we are so that we can see it and so that it helps us to see clearly too.

Christians are meant to be seen. There is no such thing as a secret Christian. William Barclay says "Either the Christianity destroys the secrecy or the secrecy destroys the Christianity". If Christianity is working it is visible.

Christian thoughts and actions should be seen in the community because that is how we behave in all that we do. Our Christian faith is just as much alive and in evidence in the local supermarket, when we are walking the dog, at our place of work or at the gym. This command to be a light is not a churchy thing. It is about the way we live our lives.

The light must be seen so that it can warn us of danger and guide us to safety. This is the kind of light that a Christian living in the community should be.

The verses that we have read today go on with "Let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven".

How do you feel about being a light in your community?

#### Prayer

Lord, help me to shine like a light in the world so that I can bring glory to your name. Amen.

## Tuesday 31 March 2009

### Being good

If a Christian is to be salt and light in the community, and if the Christian Church as a whole is to work that way too, then we must be an influence that works for good. In his letter to the Romans Paul spells out what this means.

Instead, as the scripture says: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for by doing this you will make him burn with shame. Do not let evil defeat you; instead conquer evil with good".

**Romans 12:20-21**

We all know from watching television and reading our newspapers that Christianity can be presented in the hardest and most unlovely way. On the other hand real Christianity is something which is fair for all to see. By being fair it is not just an easy going tolerance. There are times in the life of every Christian when a battle has to be fought but Paul reminds us that this should never be in the name of revenge. To treat someone with kindness rather than vengeance is the way to touch their soul. An act of vengeance may break a person's spirit but it is only kindness that will break or heal a heart.

If we show kindness to our enemies we will make them ashamed of their behaviour. This teaching is very different from the thinking of the world around us. If we are full of revenge we have allowed ourselves to be overtaken by evil. Evil can never be conquered by more evil. If hatred is met by more hatred then it gets bigger and it extends. When hatred is met with love it is rather like finding an antidote for poison. The only real way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend.

The Christian influence in the community is to be just like that – an antidote for the evil which is all around. Our presence is to be one that works for the common good.

Can you think of times, either nationally or locally, when the church has been seen in this light?

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, when you were on the cross you prayed for those who were killing you. Please help me to seek your forgiveness when I am hurting so that your love overcomes evil with good. Amen.

## Wednesday 1 April 2009

### Being love in the community

Throughout this week we are thinking about what kind of difference it makes to a community to have Christians within it. Christians are like salt and they are like light. They are goodness and all of these working together mean that they are love at work

Love your neighbour as yourself. Love cannot wrong a neighbour; therefore the whole law is summed up in love.

**Romans 13:10**

There is much written about love in the Bible and the more we read about it the more we realise that, as Birgitta Yavari said "God is love, and love lives where God is let in". It is the work of the Christian to be that channel of God's love into the community.

When we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves we are being called to see great worth in everybody. Love helps us to look beneath the surface and see the person there who is loved by God.

When we practice God's love in all that we do there is no need for any other kind of law. The laws of love given to us by God cover them all. If we love other people we will not sin against them. As Christian believers we do not live by a set of rules; we live according to the grace of God. We live, day by day, wanting to obey God and to help other people. When we stop and ask ourselves why we want to do this, it is because Christ's love lives in our hearts.

There is a famous saying of St Augustine of Hippo that says; "Love and do what you will."

In what ways do you think that the love of God at work in us helps to change our community for the better?

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, it is your love that draws me into your life. Cleanse and heal me and enable me to forgive, so that I can love my neighbour and love myself. Amen.

## Thursday 2 April 2009

Jesus makes it very clear

The story of the Good Samaritan must be one of the best known passages in the Bible. If you want to refresh your mind with the details of the story then read the verses in between the verses chosen for today.

The lawyer, desiring to justify himself, asked Jesus: "And who is my neighbour?" ... (Jesus said) "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise".

**Luke 10:29 (30-36) 37**

The lawyer was trying to wriggle out of the difficult situation that he had got himself into. He says to Jesus "Define your terms! Who is my neighbour?" The Samaritan identifies with the needs of the stranger and he has compassion on him. There is no logical reason why he should re-arrange his plans and spend his money to help an enemy in need, but mercy does not need logic. Showing mercy and being like Jesus, has got nothing to do with geography or citizenship or race. Wherever people need us we are called to be like Jesus, and be good neighbours and show mercy.

These verses remind us that we have to get out there and meet our neighbours in need.

- We have to be ready to help them even if they have brought the trouble upon themselves, as indeed this man had.
- We have to be ready to help any person of any creed or colour because our love must be as wide as the love of God.
- We must be ready to help in a practical way. The Samaritan did not just feel sorry for the man. His compassion was real and so it showed itself to be real in actions.

If our compassion for the people in our parish and community is REAL then it must be showing itself in actions.

What is my church actually doing to show God's love in the community?

What am I actually doing to show God's love in the community?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to remember that what you said to the scribe you are also saying to me. Amen.

## Friday 3 April 2009

Sharing the load

Jesus needs ambassadors in the world. When we are at work in the community we are ambassadors for the King.

After this the Lord chose another seventy-two men and sent them out two by two, to go ahead of him to every town and place where he himself was about to go. He said to them, "There is a large harvest, but few workers to gather it in. Pray to the owner of the harvest that he will send out workers to gather in his harvest!"

**Luke 10:1-3**

These men are not called apostles (which means "those who are sent") but they are sent out with a special job to do for the King. They were really *ambassadors* because they went out to represent the King. They were sent by him and they went before him in order to prepare the way for his coming. This is hard work. There were not many of them to do an enormous job. It is interesting to note that they did not pray for an easier job but they prayed for more people to share the load. How often as Christians do we pray for someone else to do a job that we do not want to do ourselves?

They were ambassadors of peace. They were sent out by Jesus to heal the sick and to bring the Good News to those who had not heard it. They knew that some people would reject them. It is now, as it was then, a serious thing to reject the ambassadors that God sends. However, these ambassadors were under no illusions – they knew that the work would be tough.

All of this is about how we relate to God and to the community which he calls us to serve. It is God himself who sends us out to be his ambassadors in the community. If we are faithful to our calling then all we can do is offer people's reactions to us back to him.

Have you ever thought of yourself as an ambassador for the King of Kings? How does it feel to be given that title?

Prayer

Lord God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, give me all the courage and strength that I need to do your work in this community, even when people turn against the message of your love. Amen.

## Saturday 4 April 2009

### Real community

When we are thinking about what it is that God is calling us to do, and who he is calling us to be in the community, we need to think about our own relationship with God, as well the relationship that he has with the people that he calls us to serve.

When one of those who sat at table with him heard this, he said to him, "blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him "A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, "Come for all is now ready" But they all alike began to make excuses... And the master said to the servant, "Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet".

**Luke 14:15-18a, 23, 24**

The Bible has a recurring picture of the day when God would give a great feast to his people. It is this banquet that the man who spoke to Jesus was thinking about. When he was speaking about the happiness of the guests invited to the banquet he was thinking about them – the elite. In his eyes they were the IN crowd. It would never occur to him that sinners of all kinds would find a place at God's feast. This is why Jesus told this story.

When God invited people to his feast they tragically refused their invitations. The poor from the streets and those gathered from the roads and the hedges responded positively in a way that the orthodox believers never did.

Jesus' symbol of the kingdom is of a feast and a banquet. As Christians working for him we must not be afraid to enjoy ourselves! We have an open invitation to the feast. But this passage challenges us to think about how we value that invitation and about how we relate to the other guests. Is it a celebration for the IN crowd or is it a celebration to which the marginalized and excluded are welcomed? It is good to remember that we are all part of the great family and household of God.

### Prayer

Lord God, we know that there is a place at your table for everyone who accepts your invitation. Help me to respond lovingly to my invitation and to be ready and welcoming to all whom I meet on their way there too. Amen.

## Sunday 5 April 2009

### Palm Sunday

### The Cross – was it worth it?

Palm Sunday is the beginning of the most significant week in history for Christians. At the heart of that week is a cross, now the symbol of Christianity. But what does the cross mean? What is its significance for us? Was it worth it?

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

**Romans 5:6-8**

All too often we use the phrase, "I love you", easily and glibly. Do we always demonstrate that it is true? They say: "actions speak louder than words", but do our actions support our words? In this matter, God cannot be faulted. Paul tells us that God has demonstrated his own love for us through the death of Christ.

What is more, in emphasizing the greatness of this love-in-action, Paul reminds us that when God did it, we were not exactly nice people to know: we were ungodly, we were sinners, and we were in a helpless state. At that precise moment God acted in love and Jesus died for us. Amazing love!

John agrees with Paul and is equally amazed:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10-11)

It is a great irony that one of the cruellest actions ever (crucifixion) could also be the greatest ever demonstration of love. So, as we consider the cross this holy week and ask the question "Was it worth it?", we answer, "Yes!" Now I know he loves me!

### Prayer

How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that he should give his only Son to make a wretch his treasure (Stuart Townend). Thank you, Lord. Amen.

## Monday 6 April 2009

*Monday of Holy Week*

The Cross – was it worth it?

...righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus... Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Romans 3:22-24; 5:1**

Have you ever been in a court of law? – not in the dock, hopefully! If not, you may well have seen court scenes on TV. The process is clear: someone is accused of doing something wrong, evidence is heard and challenged, a verdict is given, and sentence passed.

This is the background to Paul's words here. It is we who are in the dock, accused of breaking God's law – and however good we may be, we are all in the same boat, because none of us keeps God's law fully and always. The verdict is given, "guilty".

So far, the process is familiar. But then comes the surprise: the judge (God) declares: "you are justified", that is, cleared, nothing to pay, free to go. And we may want to say: How come? And the answer is: Jesus has done the necessary so that you can be free – that is another way of saying "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (v.24).

There are many today who know they have got it wrong, feel guilty about it, have no peace, but don't know what to do or where to go. What they really need to hear are the words: "you are forgiven, free to go". We can point them to the cross where all may find forgiveness, freedom and peace because of Jesus. And that has to be Good News!

The cross – was it worth it? Yes – because of the cross I know I am OK by God and can enjoy peace with him.

Prayer

He died that we might be forgiven, he died to make us good, that we might go at last to heaven, saved by his precious blood. (*Cecil Frances Alexander*)

Thank you, Lord. Amen.

## Tuesday 7 April 2009

*Tuesday of Holy Week*

The Cross – was it worth it?

The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst... For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.

**1 Timothy 1:14-15; 2:5-6a**

Talk of ransom has been in the news from time to time over recent years as people have been taken hostage. Demands have been made for money or exchange of prisoners in order to secure their release. This is the imagery Paul is using here to explain what Jesus did at the cross. To ransom is to buy someone or something back.

The same principle operates in the pawnbroker's business: when you are hard up you can go and sell something; then when things improve you can go and buy it back (at a higher price, of course) – you ransom or redeem it. When Jesus died on the cross we were "bought back" for God.

A story: there was once a young lad who made a wonderful model yacht. One day he went with his father to a nearby lake to sail it. All was well until the string attached to the model boat snagged and broke – the wind carried the yacht away across the water. Some time later the lad was with his father visiting a village the other side of the lake. In the village street there was a second-hand shop and the boy noticed in the window his model yacht. He was excited and insisted on buying it. As he came out of the shop, proudly clutching his yacht, he said to his dad: "This boat is now twice mine: first I made it, now I have bought it."

It is only a story, but it illustrates well today's theme: God made us and loves us so much that when we went astray he bought us back through Jesus. So, in a sense, we are twice his!

The cross – was it worth it? Yes – although I have gone astray, through the cross I have been bought back by God. Praise him!

Prayer

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Amen.

## Wednesday 8 April 2009

*Wednesday of Holy Week*

The Cross – was it worth it?

“Been there! Done that! Got the T-shirt!” In a sense that is what the writer to the Hebrews is saying about Jesus.

For this reason he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted... he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

**Hebrews 2:17-18; 9:26b**

The letter is full of Temple-talk: e.g. high priest, sacrifice, atonement. The priest was the go-between between people and God, the sacrifice was offered by the priest to God for the sins of the people, atonement was what that offering achieved – forgiveness. Jesus, according to the writer to the Hebrews, is all those things: the best high priest ever, the most effective sacrifice ever, and providing a permanent means of forgiveness so that sacrifice is never needed to be made again.

Jesus' chief qualification for this is that he knows us and sympathises with us. A person who is blessed with a pain-free life sometimes finds it difficult to understand someone who experiences much pain. A person who learns easily is sometimes impatient with the slow-learner. But because Jesus has lived the human life he knows and understands us, even experiencing temptation – he is the perfect “go-between”.

So, there is in place the means of forgiveness for our sins - when we come to God in confession we know we are forgiven. St. John put it like this: “...if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins...” (1 John 2:1-2).

The cross – was it worth it? Yes – because of it we know we can be forgiven – always!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, priest and sacrifice, thank you that because of your cross I can be forgiven today, tomorrow and always. Amen.

## Thursday 9 April 2009

*Maundy Thursday*

The Cross – was it worth it?

Isn't it great to have friends, those you can depend on at all times, those you can trust in all things? But isn't it terrible when the friendship is spoiled? Something is said or done which hurts the other person and destroys the friendship. When that happens we want to sort it, to put it right, to restore the relationship – we want to be friends again.

The Bible talks about the effect of our sin in that way: sin is breaking God's rules, yes, but more than that, sin destroys our relationship with God. How can we be friends with God again?

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sin against them.

**Romans 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19**

The amazing thing is, it is we who spoil the relationship with God through our sin, but it is God who takes the initiative to put it right: through Christ he offers us not just forgiveness but reconciliation – we can be God's friends again! On the cross his arms are open to welcome us back. As a sign of our thanks for the renewal of friendship he invites us to do the same: to forgive and make friends with others.

It was on this day that Jesus had the Last Supper with his friends. It was there that he first offered his followers the symbols of this reconciliation, broken bread and poured out wine. As we reach out our hands to receive those symbols again, let us remember: we are receiving reconciliation and God's friendship. Give thanks!

The cross – was it worth it? Yes – because of the cross I can be friends with God.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that you offer us your friendship. Help us to offer friendship to others. Amen.

## Friday 10 April 2009

### *Good Friday*

The Cross – was it worth it?

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

Today we remember the death of Jesus on the cross. It was an awful and terrible event. Yet, as we have seen, an event which offers so much. It demonstrates God's love for us, puts us right with God, provides a permanent way of forgiveness, makes us God's friends.

Paul sums up the achievement of the cross in these words:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

**1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-24**

Crucifixion is one of the most painful deaths that human beings have ever devised, and the act of crucifixion must have been an awful scene to witness. A man hanging dying on a cross clearly demonstrates foolishness and weakness. Yet, surprisingly, Paul uses the opposite words to explain the crucifixion of Jesus: wisdom and power.

Years ago a Christian preacher was speaking at Speakers' Corner. He was being heckled by a man with communist sympathies. Pointing to a shabbily dressed man at the front of the crowd the heckler called out: "Communism can put a new coat on that man!" The preacher responded: "Jesus Christ can put a new man in that coat!" Which is the greater power?

The cross – was it worth it? Yes – the cross unleashes power which can change our lives.

### Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for all the benefits you have won for us, for all the pains and insults you have borne for us. Most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may we know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

## Saturday 11 April 2009

### *Easter Eve*

The Cross – was it worth it?

Easter Eve – an in-between day, between death and resurrection. That first Easter Jesus lay buried in the garden tomb, his followers dispirited, his ministry over – or so they thought! In the early church it was a day of complete fasting in preparation for Easter. As more came forward to join the church, it became the day when those being baptised at Easter made a public profession of their faith.

But what possible significance can Easter Eve have for us today? It may feel like any other Saturday – we may have a lay-in, or go shopping, or play sport, or go visiting friends. We might, later on, go to church, perhaps for a Vigil Service. But what does it mean? How can we celebrate Easter Eve? Perhaps St. Paul can help us.

...don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his... Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

**Romans 6:3-5,8**

So Paul compares Jesus' death and burial with baptism. When we were baptised it was "into his death". And just as Jesus' death is the gateway to resurrection, so our baptism is the gateway to new life. This is vividly seen in a believers' baptism service when the candidates enter the water down one flight of steps (leaving the old life behind), are immersed in the water (buried), and emerge up another flight of steps (entering the new life).

So this Easter Eve is an excellent opportunity for us to pause, to reflect and to ask: "Have I passed (in Christ) from death to life?" So am I ready fully to celebrate resurrection life tomorrow?

The cross – was it worth it? Yes – it is the gateway to life.

### Prayer

In baptism, God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light. To follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him. Let it be so, Lord. Amen.

## Sunday 12 April 2009

### *Easter Sunday*

The Cross – was it worth it?

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you... [Jesus] was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.

**1 Peter 1:3-4; 3:18b**

Can you hear the thrill and excitement in Peter's words? He acknowledges with thanks the amazing benefits that are ours because of Jesus, in particular, because of the resurrection of Jesus.

First, there is 'new birth'. This is a recurring theme in the New Testament: it is the promise of a new start with all the mistakes and messes of the past sorted – remember all the things we have been thinking about this week.

Second, there is a 'living hope'. We are living in difficult days. So much that happens in the world brings a negative feel to life, even a hopeless feel. In Christ and because of Christ, despite everything, we can be positive.

Corrie ten Boom was travelling in a London commuter train. All the passengers in her compartment were behind their newspapers. A voice came from behind one: "The outlook's grim!" In a flash, she responded: "The uplook's great!" One by one the newspapers came down.

Third, we are promised an 'inheritance', something to look forward to. What is more, that inheritance is imperishable, unspoilt and unfading. That's quite a promise! And all because of the resurrection of Jesus. No wonder Peter gets excited! Easter Day is a good day to get excited. Rejoice!

The cross – was it worth it? Yes – because of the death and resurrection of Jesus we have a sorted past, a joyful present, and a promising future!

### Prayer

Oh, to know the power of your risen life, and to know you in your sufferings. To become like you in your death, my Lord, so with you to live and never die. (Graham Kendrick)