

FAITH

AN EXPLORATION

INTRODUCTION

THIS is a collection of short articles about aspects of the Christian faith. As individuals each of us may freely believe all manner of things, but faith is an essentially communal enterprise. So these articles are an attempt to connect individual belief with the communal faith of the followers of Jesus Christ – faith expressed in liturgy, theology, church and mission.

Faith is a personal experience, but like all experience it remains essentially individual until it is communicated using words or some other system of symbolic representation. So when I attempt to talk about Christian faith I very soon find myself up against lots of big words, technical words which are actually very dense in meaning, and with long histories. This collection of articles is an attempt to explore some of those big words. Needless to say, it is heavily dependent on the insight and wisdom of many others, some of whose names appear in the end-notes.

Every attempt to reflect on faith is bound to some specific time, place and group of persons. So this collection makes no pretence to comprehensively describe everything about faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, it is grounded in, and therefore limited by, the particularity of the faith community in which it has been formed, and of course by the particularity of my faith and the limits of my understanding.

The articles were originally written as weekly pastoral letters for the people of the Anglican parish of St Luke's in the City, Christchurch, during the almost six months of the church's year known as the Sundays after Pentecost.

The starting place for these reflections is explained in the first article. The assumption I am making is that Christian faith is formed in the context of the worship of the community of believers. Thus the rudder for these articles is the liturgy of Word and Sacrament, the Eucharist.

Exploration should always lead to further questions. No exploration is complete. This collection is no exception - I anticipate that correction and modification will be necessary, and comments to that end will be appreciated.

My hope is that some of the questions about the big words of Christian faith may be answered just sufficiently in order to be of assistance, and that new questions will stimulate your own exploration.

FR DAVID MOORE

1 LEX ORANDI, LEX CREDENDI

THE liturgical calendar offers many riches, the most important of which is the fact that it locates us and our faith firmly within the context of the community of believers. The lectionary will not let us be idiosyncratic believers, free to think or believe anything at all. The ebb and flow of its high days and ordinary days, its seasonal colours and symbols, the cyclic pattern of ritual actions and pattern of readings from sacred Scripture carry us all along – regardless where each of us may be individually in our lives. I may feel buoyant or despairing at any given time, yet in the liturgy I am with all of you, and together our mixed-up assortment of subjective feelings is held in a safe and sacred container which is both wider and deeper than any single one of us. In the liturgy we are like the occupants of a vessel carried by the ocean's swell. Not surprising, then, that arks and boats have long been popular metaphors for the church, and that medieval architects sought to carve out that shape in amazing church roofs.

The bobbing vessel, rising and falling through the crests and troughs of the liturgical year is the body of Christ on the way, not isolated believers trying to save ourselves by our own imagined piety or strength, or good works or fervent beliefs. Rather, members of the body of Christ, saved by grace through faith in being one in Christ. After the troughs and peaks of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and Lent-Easter the church sails into the expansive and pacific waters of the almost-half of the year called 'Sundays after Pentecost'.

These reflections consider various aspects of this sacred container which holds us safely together in spite of, and through the riches of, our uniquely subjective experience. One of the blessings of our Anglican heritage is that though our reforming forebears sought to abolish ecclesiastical abuses and recover the centrality of Scripture and the doctrine of justification by faith through grace, they did not succumb to the brutal rationalism of the continental reformers. Tempted, certainly. Nevertheless, they resisted the temptation to erect a legally-binding edifice of confessional statement. The treasure of Anglicanism has been expressed by many of the giants from our tradition in the aphorism: *Lex orandi, lex credendi* – 'the rule of prayer is the rule of belief'. Belief, that is to say, is not to be forged out of holding to a list of propositions, to be guarded at threat of hell-fire. Instead of constructing a confessional statement Anglicans fashioned a Prayer Book. Instead of making a list of propositions the conditions for belonging in the boat, Anglicans prayed liturgically – that is to say, prayer was not envisaged as a purely private matter between me and the Holy Spirit, but as the communal work of love we undertake in company with each other, Sunday-by-Sunday, week-by-week. As our little vessel plies the waters of the Church's Year, it is the prayer we make together, the liturgy, which forms and shapes our belief. All aboard!

2 SCRIPTURE, TRADITION, REASON

WHAT do Christians believe, and how? There is on offer a bewildering range of answers. Some Christians, taking out of context Martin Luther's dictum of 'sola Scriptura' ("Scripture alone"), claim the Bible teaches the Christian disciple absolutely everything they need to know. Other Christians are embarrassed by the Bible. Particularly since the time of the 16th century Reformations the church has been divided as to the status and role of the Bible, the ancient sources of Christian tradition, and, increasingly, the relationship between theology and science. Some Christians, eager to defend the integrity of the Bible and the honour of God have denounced all scientific discoveries which appear to undermine Biblical authority – such as the rejection of carbon dating and the fossil record and the claim that the world is only six and a half thousand years old. It also has to be said that some Christians, embarrassed by God's apparent ignorance about biology and God's apparent violence, deprecate the Biblical texts *in toto*.

Mainstream Anglicans have refused to follow either of these dead ends. The Anglican position is famously known by the expression 'Scripture, Tradition, Reason'. Anglicans rejected the puritan distortion, that the Bible contains all knowledge – rules for the life of the church as well as information on all subjects. As Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey put it, "Scripturalism is not the same thing as the appeal to Holy Scripture"! ⁱ Rather, as the ordination candidate confesses before the bishop, echoing the 39 Articles, Anglicans declare that the 'Holy Scriptures contain the truth necessary for salvation.' ⁱⁱ For salvation! Whatever is needed 'for salvation' is to be found in Scripture, but that does not necessarily mean that we will find in Scripture a definitive set of rules for the life of the church. Nor should we expect to find in Scripture explanations for biological, paleontological and astronomical phenomena.

Anglicans rejected the puritan claim that the Bible can be read in isolation, knowing that it is highly unlikely that Scripture can be rightly understood in an ego-centric vacuum. It is the community of believers, the church, which is the witness to, the keeper of, and the interpreter of Holy Scripture. That is to say, 'Tradition' – the writings of the Church Fathers & Mothers, antiquity as interpreted by the living church in the context of liturgical prayer. And Anglicans have always rejected the anti-scientific, anti-modernist, anti-intellectual tendencies of puritans and other literalists, recognising that reason – the human capacity for logical thought and the application of moral conscience – is a God-given attribute, the divine Logos deepening our understanding of divine revelation. May our mission and ministry at the junction be formed by the creative synthesis of balanced faithfulness to Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

3 EXPERIENCE

THE appeal to reason spares Christians from the tyranny of both scripturalism and traditionalism, through the acknowledgement that God reveals God's-self not only through ancient texts and ancient church practices and creeds, but also through the human capacity to reason. Revelation, when reason is employed, can never be summed up by either bible or the teachings of the early church 'Fathers' alone. Hence, our Anglican tripod – 'Scripture. Tradition. Reason'. One of our early giants, Richard Hooker, recommended the appeal to reason as the moderate course between Rome on the one hand and Geneva on the other.

A critical use of human reason enables us to examine the biblical texts using the insights from historical, linguistic, archaeological and anthropological sciences. In contrast to straitjacketing tendencies of both scripturalism and traditionalism, the application of reason has opened the Scriptures and the tradition to live and breathe in each successive generation. The application of reason has fostered both critical Biblical studies as well as the liturgical and ecumenical movements – not to mention the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, the denunciation of racism. Christian faith, reason declares, does not mean checking one's brain at the church door. 'Thinking welcome here!'

However, 'reason', a term with weighty philosophical overtones, deserves some further reflection. There's a tendency to consider experience as the opposite of reason. So though it seems it was assumed by Hooker, experience is in some respects a fourth leg to the Anglican stool. Experience tends to be very subjective, sometimes strictly personal, though there is also a communal dimension. Peter's vision on the rooftop of Simon the tanner's house in Joppa was a personal, subjective sensory experience. There was no rational basis for Peter's experience, though after the event he was able to draw upon the reality of his sensory experience in the service of a rational re-imagining of not only the food laws but also the purity codes more generally as justification for baptising a household full of Gentiles.ⁱⁱⁱ The fact that he did so, against the full force of Jerusalem church Biblicism and traditionalism makes all the difference to you and me. We would possibly not be here at all in the household of faith but for Peter's willingness to trust his experience!

Following Peter's footsteps there have been countless faithful believers of Bible and tradition who have trusted this fourth leg of revelation. In spite of apparent conflict with Scripture and tradition, their experiences, like Peter's, have precipitated transformation of both church and world. May we too be open to God's Spirit, blowing through the Scriptures and the Tradition of the church, enlightening our minds, and revealing unexpected truths through our sensory experience.

4 COMPREHENSIVENESS

COMPREHENSIVENESS has been an Anglican watchword. Admittedly, for some observers outside the Anglican Communion there may appear to be an indecisiveness about Anglicans. The Rabbinical saying comes to mind: “Two Rabbis, three opinions!” Some outsiders are mystified by the fact that Anglicans do not seem to have a fixed opinion on anything, that there is no confessional statement such as is typical among those churches more heavily influenced by John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and John Knox, and to a lesser extent Martin Luther. The (inaccurate) caricature is that Anglicans take no stand on anything, and therefore stand for nothing. Anglican bishops are asked by the perplexed media, what do Anglicans believe about abortion, gene-splicing, homosexuality, contraception, and so on. Most often their answers are puzzlingly, and perhaps disappointingly, inconclusive. At least literalists, fundamentalist and legalists give direct and definite answers! As an aside, it is a damning indictment on the church almost universally that these are the sorts of questions the media always wants to ask of bishops. Why, for instance, are church leaders not consulted on matters to do with inequitable property ownership, currency mechanisms, tax reform, public housing, labour laws, investment practices, and so on?

But others have delighted that Anglican theology is generously ‘comprehensive’, sufficient so as to hold in check the excesses of the fundamentalisms of both biblicism and traditionalism. For some, the ‘Anglican settlement’ has appeared to offer the ideal containment and détente between so-called ‘evangelicals’, ‘catholics’, ‘liberals’, and ‘conservatives’. We should not underestimate this very Anglican capacity, forged out of the convulsions in late 16th and early 17th century England. Though we may laugh at the quaintness and apparent irrelevance of ‘Vicar of Dibley’ Anglicanism, the fact remains that in such a church there is room for all – no small accomplishment!

No doubt this is the very reason why we are finding the current times so painful. Anglican ‘comprehensiveness’ is certainly being tested to its limits. The then-beleaguered Archbishop of Canterbury gave an interview in 2007 in which he expressed openly his fears for the future of the Anglican Communion, so seriously stretched to snapping point are the ‘bonds of affection’. Political groupings in our church are inclined to conscript words from the tradition which actually belong to all of the baptised – ‘evangelical’ and ‘catholic’ are words with which we are marked by our baptism. We should object in the strongest possible terms to the theft of generous and life-giving words which belong to the whole Christian community in the services of narrow agendas of this political grouping or that.

5 SACRAMENT

I have spoken of the 'sacred container' of the church and its liturgy. Now I want to explore a particular aspect of that sacred container, which I will refer to as sacramentality. Our faith is not a collection of ideas – though it does depend upon certain ideas. Our faith is a relationship, with God, through the person of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. But because God is ultimate reality and ultimately unknowable – the Holy One, the unnameable 'Other' – everything we might know about God is necessarily mediated. The Scriptures are the written mediation of that Divine revelation. However (despite the mistaken impression many inside and outside the church might have on this subject) for Christians the Word is not a book but a person. The Word is a living Word, the resurrected and ascended eternally-present Christ, who we know by the traces of his presence through Scripture, in liturgy, in experience of life, in encounter with other human persons and with the creation.

In other words, Christian faith is always mediated through sacrament, the tangible means which engage our minds, bodies and psyches in the intangible Reality. There has been much debate throughout the Christian centuries about the meaning of 'sacrament'. St Augustine of Hippo is said to have claimed that there are literally hundreds of sacraments. The Church eventually settled on seven Sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Unction, Ordination, and Matrimony. Of course, the church itself is a sacrament. In all cases there is an obvious 'outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace', as the Book of Common Prayer so succinctly put the matter.

So there are these two different ways of thinking about sacramentality. There is the fact that matter matters, that we are bodily and material beings, and that knowledge of God can only be mediated knowledge. People, places, things and events are the Divine traces of God's presence in Christ among us. Life IS sacramental, as any lover knows. Then there are those communally-shared ritual actions which make and hold the faithful as the community of Christ believers, without which there is no church and no Christian. By the Sacrament of Baptism we become members of the Body of Christ. By the Sacrament of Eucharist we are sustained and grow into that which is already, by grace, our identity. "We break this bread to share in the Body of Christ. We who are many are one body, for we all share in the one bread." ^{iv} That is not merely a proposition. It is only real because we DO it, because we eat and drink, together, from one bread and one cup. St Augustine told us how to respond to the Sacramental Bread placed into our hand: "Say 'Amen!' to what you are". The Sacrament both expresses the truth that we are already the Body of Christ, and simultaneously invites each of us to say 'Let this be so' in me.

6 BAPTISM

ONE of the great accomplishments of the ecumenical and liturgical movements of the 20th century was the restoration of baptism to the place of centrality and priority in the life and liturgy of the church. When I was commissioned as parish priest one of the symbols presented was the baptismal ewer. Parish representatives said to me: “This water is a sign that you are among us as one who brings people to new birth”. The whole congregation then declared: “With you, we will celebrate our life in the Spirit”. The Font stands at the entrance to the church building, a resounding symbol of baptism as our one common belonging as members of the Body of Christ.

We gather communally at the Font not only at Easter, but also for baptisms, the feast of the Baptism of our Lord, Candlemass and on the day of Pentecost. It remains filled to the brim – except during the Lenten fast, when the Font is drained and sealed – so that every time we enter the church building we may touch again the waters of our rebirth, marking ourselves again with the same sign that was given to us at our baptism.

Ideally, the waters of the Font would be running – streams of living water – and with a volume sufficient for immersion. Liturgical renewal since the 1960s has been greatly influenced by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, but that in turn stands on the efforts of scholars and liturgists who worked across the old denominational divides for more than 50 years before Vatican II for a renewed and revitalised faithfulness to the tradition.

Baptism belongs to the whole church. As sacrament, baptism plunges us into the Christian tradition. Baptism is the sacramental trace of the dying and rising which will require a lifetime of faithfulness to complete. Regardless whether we spoke the words of affirmation ourselves or whether they were spoken on our behalf, none of us fully understands what it means to be baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ in that singular sacramental moment. Our calling as the baptised, and as the baptised community is a life-long call to dying and rising in Christ.

7 EUCHARIST

THERE are many reasons why eucharist came to be highly regarded but little practiced in Anglican history. I am no historian, and even they paint no simple picture on the subject. By the late Middle Ages eucharistic practices had become prevalent which would have been both completely unrecognisable and completely inconsistent with the early church's ritual communal meal. As it goes with reform movements which work by extreme reaction, in reclaiming one truth frequently another is lost. Consequently, generations of Anglicans were fed a lop-sided diet of Word-without-Sacrament, of Matins and Evensong with occasional (three or four times a year) Eucharist. It was not until the mid 19th century that the centrality of Eucharist as principal liturgy of the church came to be asserted again, and it took many decades for that to take effect in parishes. (Some parishes haven't heard yet!) Another blessing of the 20th century ecumenical and liturgical movements has been the recovery of not only baptism but also Eucharist.

One of the most influential documents circulating in the mid 20th century was the World Council of Churches' "Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry". Christians of many stripes and persuasions came to realise that, regardless of historical differences, we have a common initiation into Christ by Baptism, and by the one Eucharistic action of Christ in which we participate we are becoming what we are. In baptism we are born, but at the table we are fed. Jesus said, "This is my body for you. This is my blood". Christ is present on the table and gathered around the table. When Sacramental Bread is placed in our hands we say 'Amen!' to what we are. As the Bread of the Sacrament becomes a sign for our very own bodies, we become that living bread – living sacrifices, offered for the life of the world, to the glory of the One who took our humanity, that we might share in divinity. Eucharist is indeed the 'source and summit'!

All of this requires REAL presence. Not only the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament – which Martin Luther vigorously defended, against extremists – but our real presence also. Real people with real fears, hopes, memories, joys, agonies, conflicts and desires – not let's-pretend, triumphalist, moralising religion. Real bread which is actually broken and shared among God's people. Real tables around which the community of believers can literally gather in common sharing – not distant altars, and not altars fenced off behind medieval barricades. Real action involving the whole of the assembled believers, engaging all the senses - not just disembodied minds and torrents of words. Symbols large enough to be seen, touched, tasted and heard – not embarrassed and barely visible concessions to some misunderstood and sentimentalised history. Ritual actions in which all are doused with water, all are censured, where before God, and in the sacramental moment, the status, class and role we play in daily life become as nothing.

8 CONFIRMATION

IF we are over a certain age there is a fair chance that we were baptised as infant and confirmed as we entered teen years. Some lament the apparent demise of confirmation, fondly remembering 1950s, 60s and 70s armies of pre-pubescent boys and girls lined up in their Sunday best, the bulging attendances. When the bishop made his confirmation visit we could feel as though the next generation of churchgoers was guaranteed. Nostalgics seemed to have overlooked, however, the fact that very few of the soldiers of that child army attend churches any more! Confirmation was also the 'meal ticket', the passport to communion. Infants and small children were baptised, but were deliberately excluded from eucharist. Confirmation was the adolescent rite of passage into an adult world, and therefore probably also doubled as an initiation rite, a remnant of pre-modern wisdom. Among Anglicans confirmation came to be understood as 'full membership of the church'. However 20th century liturgical and ecumenical movements have shifted the emphasis back onto baptism as the one and only sacramental sign of belonging. And because of that re-centering on baptism it no longer makes sense for confirmation to be the meal-ticket. Eucharist is for all the baptised – regardless of age, qualification, intelligence, soundness of mind, colour, wealth, gender, sexuality, ethnicity – or any other distinction which legalmindedness may construct!

Confirmation has a complex history. There have been a wide variety of practices and various symbolic elements to the rite, across the centuries and the different parts of the church. Among those facts on which historians agree is that confirmation arose out of practical necessity. The early baptismal rites included submersion in water, anointing with oil, the presentation of light, the laying on of hands, invocation of the Holy Spirit. The bishop baptised. But with the empire expansion of the church, numerically and geographically, the number of baptism candidates outstripped the number of available bishops. As the bishop's local 'cure of souls' the priest was delegated to wash with water, and in some instances to anoint with oil. But the bishop would come later, to anoint and lay on hands as a 'completion' of what was begun in baptism. The distance between the two parts of the rite grew from weeks to years, and eventually (and with a very much more complicated history!) resulted in two completely separate sacramental actions. As always, theological justifications follow practical necessity.

I have argued that faith is always mediated through sacrament, because we are bodily, because matter matters. Regardless of whatever historical differences of opinion there may be about origins and development of confirmation, the fact remains that the fleshy episcopal laying-on of hands tangibly expresses the sealing of the Holy Spirit and the ratification of adult discipleship as those baptised sent for mission in the name of Christ crucified and risen. Furthermore, the fact is that people respond to the Spirit's promptings at any and every stage of life, and it's the faith community's joy to celebrate that fact.

9 BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION A

THE Primates of the Anglican Communion have encouraged all Anglicans to take seriously Biblical hermeneutics. From the Greek verb *ερμηνεύω* *hērmēneuō*, meaning 'to interpret', hermeneutics is in fact what all of us do the moment we pick up our Bibles. It is impossible to read Scripture (or anything else!) other than as an exercise in interpretation. Hermeneutics is as natural as breathing and eating. The Bible is not a book that falls out of the sky with a single and unambiguous meaning. The Bible is not a 'book' in the conventional sense, but a diverse collection of writings composed and collected over more than a millennium. Interpretation is inescapable.

The Bible is presently (and has probably always been) at risk from two deadly extremes – literalism which erroneously claims a 'plain meaning' of Scripture; on the other hand a rationalist reduction of Scripture to an inoffensive collection of improving stories and moral lessons. Literalism is driven by anxiety and fear, that any questions of the Biblical text will inevitably lead to a collapse of the deck of cards of faith. Anxiety is the true source of frothy-mouthed and legalistic statements about 'inerrancy' and 'authority'. The reductive mindset, on the other hand, is driven by a fear of religious fanatics waving floppy Bibles with aggressive fists, hell-bent on rules and regulations.

The paradox is that both the literalist mind and the reductive mind are equally terrified of the mystery of soul (*ψυχή* *psychē*), which functions according to a language and grammar that challenges and threatens both legalism and rationalism. The tragedy of so much that passes for 'mission' and 'evangelism' is that, ultimately, it is repellent to most sensible people because its legalistic mindset is the enemy of true freedom. Equally tragic is that what passes for 'liberalism', evacuated of soul, is ultimately no different from polite and decent moral humanism.

Christian faith is grounded in and guided by the witness of Sacred Scripture. However for Christians, unlike our Jewish and Moslem sisters and brothers, the Word is not a collection of writings. Scripture has authority, but its authority is not a collection of words between two covers. The Word is actually a Living Word, Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Authority is not a static source of information, a rule book, a set of orders by which the religious mind can free itself from all anxiety and doubt. The Windsor Report states: "The purpose of Scripture is not simply to supply true information, nor just to prescribe in matters of belief and conduct, nor merely to act as a court of appeal, but to be part of the dynamic life of the Spirit through which God the Father is making the victory which was won by Jesus' death and resurrection operative within the world and in and through human beings." ^v The life of faith, and the life of the church, depend on the authority of the Living Word, exercised through Sacred Scripture.

10 BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION B

IN just what way is Scripture authoritative, if not 'prescription in matters of belief and conduct', nor as 'court of appeal'? I am back where I began, with that very Anglican principle *Lex orandi, lex credendi* – 'the rule of prayer is the rule of belief'. This is of the greatest import, a principle which is violated every time some group claims to have an infallible or unchallengeable interpretation of Scripture. The fact is that our church is not based on a confessional statement, such as the 'covenant' which has been proposed for the Anglican Communion. The Windsor Report states "that for scripture to 'work' as the vehicle of God's authority it is vital that it be read at the heart of worship in a way which (through appropriate lectionaries, and the use of scripture in canticles etc.) allows it to be heard, understood and reflected upon, not as a pleasing religious background noise, but as God's living and active word." ^{vi} Scripture cannot be sensibly read alone, in glorious isolation – this is a tragic 16th century error, which has spawned much idiosyncratic, oppressive and brutal religious sectarianism.

It is critical to grasp the fact that the sacred texts are liturgical texts first and foremost. Interpretation of Scripture includes the work of tireless and faithful Biblical scholarship, but can never be reduced to that alone. Scripture is the prayer-filled lovesong of the God who will not let us go, the God who cannot be contained by either literalist rules and regulations or reductive humanism. Jesus encountered Scripture in the prayer of synagogue and Temple. The early church's texts were not written for private readership but to be read in the liturgical assembly.

The liturgical assembly is never a court room, in which the infallibility of one or another interpretation of Scripture is settled once and for all. In the liturgy sacred Scripture expresses its true authority as an act of prayer. In the liturgy Scripture and Sacrament together open our hearts and our eyes to the Living Word, to Christ who is revealed by the power of the Spirit. In the liturgy the Word is apprehended in and through not only the words of the Bible but the living words of those who gather around a table, the priesthood of the believers.

There is never a 'plain meaning' in such encounter, for the mysterious complexity of human lives inevitably leads us into fertile terrain-crossing, of culture, ethnicity, gender and so on. Scripture divorced from Eucharist is anti-Incarnational, likely to lead to a dis-embodiment of the Biblical texts, either in the direction of legalism, or toward reductionism. Truly Christian Biblical interpretation, however, is always the work of the liturgy, the 'prayer work' of the community of believers who break the Bread of Life and who share in the Cup of Suffering of the real and present Christ. We need each other, week-by-week, for this great and demanding work of love!

11 MARY

It is common for Anglican churches to have an image of Mary the Mother of our Lord, in glass, sculpture, embroidery, or icon – some Anglican churches have several. Mary is the Theo-tokos – the God-bearer – known in English speaking tradition as ‘Mother of God’.^{vii} The most ancient representation of Mary, the Virgin of the Sign is reckoned to have originated in the fifth century CE. Mary prays in the ‘orans’ posture, showing forth to the world the new Lord, the new sovereign. Throughout the centuries Mary has continued to inspire Christians. Just as there are African and European and Asian Christs, representations of the one Lord with the distinctive features and colour of different races of people, so there are many Marys – designations of the Mother of the Lord associated with particular encounters in particular places.

The black crucifix of Nigeria and the white crucifix of Sweden are quite plainly one and the same Redeemer. So too, our Lady of Guadalupe and our Lady of Walsingham are one and the same Virgin Mary. Our Lady Captive Daughter of Zion shows Mary the Jewish girl of Nazareth with her Jewish son, dressed in the ‘tallith’ or prayer shawl, and holding the Torah scrolls. Our Lady Mother of the Streets is over the entrance to Saint Boniface Church in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. Franciscan friars who staff that church leave the doors open all day and all night so that homeless street people can shelter from the elements. God is for them, Mary is for them, the church is for them. In other words, those at risk are especially close to the divine heart, with a special call on Christian compassion. These invisible ones are visible to us, for the real presence of Christ in word and sacrament opens our eyes to Christ’s real presence in all sorts and conditions of people and places. We should not be surprised that in times of violence and places of injustice, when male power and weaponry run rampant, visions of Mary abound.

All these different Christs and Marys show that God is for us, that God is on our side, champion of the poor, friend of sinners, lover of the unloved. They show that there is no place where God is not. Christ comes to meet us in religious settings and secular settings alike, for there is no place where God is not, no place beyond God’s passionate and patient love. The incarnation once upon a time at Bethlehem happens endlessly and everywhere, for the Christlike God is always found in human flesh – embracing, forgiving, healing, blessing. God is the same yesterday, today and forever, always embodied in matter, in time and place, flesh and blood. Christ’s Mother is everyone’s Mother, tender and compassionate, for the whole suffering humanity. Christ’s Mother is always pointing to her Son. What do we hear the Mother of Our Lord saying to us at this time and this place, at the junction? Surely, Mary says what she has always been saying to the church: ‘Do whatever he tells you’.

12 MISSION A

IT'S been a boom decade for the word 'mission'. While you're reading this there's bound to be a conference about 'mission' happening somewhere. A popular how-to book doing the rounds is called *Mission-Shaped Church*. In the 1990s 'evangelism' was the catchword. This precious word that belongs to all of us is at risk of becoming just another empty marketing term. Let me state clearly at the outset: there is no 'church' except in the context of mission – that is, the believers who are sent to proclaim Christ crucified and risen. There is no 'Christian' except in the context of the mission of Christ, embodied in the community of believers, the church. For this reason, among others, there can be no such thing as a 'solo Christian', no 'private baptism', no 'Christian without church'. Mission is in fact a 'by product' of the central enterprise of the church – namely, worship of God. Whereas, obsession with 'mission' is likely to be a sign of anxiety and fear.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to mission is that we think it's something we do. True, statements about mission always talk about God's mandate. But listen carefully to the tone and what we find is a mode of discourse and behaviour which is really no different from any business plan. Mission, we are busy telling ourselves, is what we must work harder and harder to construct. We trust administrators more than saints, working parties more than prophets. Strategy for mission is something we invent and develop. Actually, this is a heresy, a deathly cocktail of ego-centrism, idolatry and fear.

The truth is that the mission is not ours at all. The mission – the Christian mission that is – belongs to God. It is the self-giving Love of God who is communion, who "shares existence with what did not exist", wrote Bishop John V Taylor, "and responded to what could not respond", whose mission Jesus embodied, by the power of the Holy Spirit. "The universe is God's 'Other', upon which his love is working to bring it to the capacity of making its free, conscious response of love, mirroring his own love".^{viii} Theologically, we name this originating principle 'Father/Mother'. The One who gives being and form to God's desire, whose mission gives it flesh and blood, we call God the Son. "The divine 'Oh yes!' which burns in God's patience and kindles our awareness... is what we call Holy Spirit".^{ix} We make a fatal error the moment we forget this fundamental fact of the Christian proclamation – the only mission is God's. It is both nonsense and arrogant to presume to plan God's mission. It is both essential and liberating to realise that God's mission predates my little plans by immense aeons, and comes to us from the future God has already fashioned which we call the Kingdom. So what, then, is our task in the light of this? The Scriptures witness time and again to this remarkable and truly mysterious fact: "God chooses not to act solo in relation to the world, but always with and through its creatures".^x God invites us to be God's partners, co-creators.

13 MISSION B

ONE of the extraordinary claims of the Scriptures is that though Israel was God's 'chosen people', nevertheless throughout the history of Israel others, outsiders of one kind or another, served as God's partners. "God isn't choosy," wrote Bishop John V Taylor. "And if God chooses his human agents so indiscriminately then who are we to refuse [them] as fellow partners".^{xi} God's 'chosen people', when preoccupied with being the chosen, however, can readily forget the reason for being church. God's choice of partners in peace-making, in justice-shaping, in feeding the poor and welcoming the outcast can be very surprising indeed. Consideration of mission cannot afford to look only at the Church, but must attend to what God's other partners are doing. This means being wide-eyed for what's actually happening at the junction, on these streets, in this local community, in this world.

Christ's mission, as witnessed in the gospels, revealed to Israel that the Temple, the true Temple, was not a building, not a holy place. Rather, the true Temple is a holy people – a 'temple not made with hands'. The baptised share in and are sent for that same mission of Christ, by the power of Holy Spirit, for the life of the world. Thus, mission does not depend on buildings, no matter how pleasing nor comforting they may be. As we reflect upon mission it is the Temple of God's holy people – recognised and unrecognised – which demands our fullest attention and love. Mission, therefore, is always costly – in fact, mission 'costs not less than everything'. "Because we are Christ's body we are the martyr church, committed to a ceaseless giving away of life for truth and in love. 'We are the Body... This is my Body...'. The two statements go together inseparably to their completion."^{xii} The mission of the church is the costly and liberating making of a new and holy people, a new Temple, a new creation. Being engaged in mission means being ourselves transformed.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to our capacity to recognise that the mission is God's, impeding our availability to be God's partners, to give our lives away in the service of the Temple which is a holy people, is our impatience. We forget that God's mission is being fulfilled in God's time. Obviously I am not advocating mere passivity. But mission does not mean guessing or orchestrating the future. Mission planning is not a crystal-ball-gazing exercise. Mission is not a franchise. The task for God's partners is to be freed from nostalgia for the past, liberated from the grip of anxiety about the future and the need to control, faithfully attentive to the now. "For those who have faith in Jesus Christ the present is the only tense".^{xiii} Let us pay attention to each and every present moment.

14 THEOLOGY A

THEOLOGY is not a dirty word! In fact, without a healthy and intelligently-engaging theology all we have is unreflective religious prejudice – which can certainly be a health hazard, as Jesus warns time and again in the gospels. It is a tragic indictment when church leaders are heard to warn some young person of the dangers of studying theology – ‘It’ll destroy your faith, you know!’ What this supposed warning really betrays is infantilism, unconsciousness, and possibly a deep-seated fear of being exposed. Such a warning amounts to saying something like: ‘If you study theology your unexamined and unconscious assumptions will be exposed, your small individual worldview will meet the wisdom of a wider world, you will be required to grow and mature in your faith. Avoid theology, therefore, and you will be able to keep your Sunday School religion intact and unquestioned (just like me).’ This is seriously misguided advice, and ultimately poisonous for the individual as well as for the mission of the church.

I doubt that the church has yet honestly faced up to the scale of the scandal against Christ’s mission, and the incalculable damage caused to persons, as a consequence of the perpetuation of Sunday School religion in adults. Robust and healthy theology is essential for all of us – people like me may have more time for the enterprise, but just as we are right to affirm the priesthood of all believers, so robust theology is essential to all the baptised.

Contrary to popular opinion, theology is not a body of rational facts delivered ready-made ‘in toto’ from on high. When the story of Moses receiving the commandments on Mount Sinai is concretised this is what the reductive mind comes up with. Theology is in fact a natural response to life. That is to say, it is always experience which comes first. Creation came first – then humans theologised. First we have an encounter – with the cosmos, with the natural world, with the Holy Mystery, with one another, with ourselves – and then we try to make some sense of it. This is theology in its most essential form.

An infant theology is probably universal – is there anyone who does not ask such questions, and come up with some ‘formula’ which can explain or make safe a bitter or frightening experience? But infant theology tends to settle on just one response, and can insist on one response for all time and for all people. If this infant theology is absolutised as a bulwark against life’s complexity and plurality this usually produces unconscious split-personalities, who are frequently dogmatic and oppressive – even violent at times.

A theology fit for adults is open to the wide winds of the Spirit who blows where she will, ^{xiv} and frees the individual to attend to life as it is actually experienced. This is why theology is so important. Christians do not *learn* theology, rather we learn to *think* theologically – to reflect on things as they are, in the light of the Scriptures, and in light of everyday life.

15 THEOLOGY B

THINKING theologically does not consist in merely acquiring a collection of facts – not possessing a body of solidified formulas, texts and doctrines, as though we were a technician confronted by a broken machine armed with a tool box and instruction manual. There are some facts, and there are certainly a great many theories and models for God, but by its very essence the enterprise we call theology is always tentative, never absolutely certain. God remains in God-self ultimately beyond our best efforts to define. To say that God is ‘Father’, for instance, for the sake of humility must immediately be followed by saying but neither is God *a* father, nor does the metaphor of father exhaustively explain or define God in God-self. A great many other such cautions could be raised. This, no doubt, is a cause for frustration for those who are looking for certainties and simplistic answers.

It is sometimes claimed that Anglicans have no clear belief on any subject. It is true that Anglican theology has always exhibited a cautious reticence when it comes to defining doctrines. But it is merely ignorant caricature to suggest from this that Anglicans believe in nothing at all. It is not a lack of belief, rather a very firm commitment to a very fundamental and particular orthodox belief – in the incomparable and awesome mystery of God, and the accompanying awareness of the limits of human understanding.^{xv} This means that we dare not prematurely pontificate, infallibly, where even angels fear to tread! And as I have noted it means that we Anglicans put our best efforts into the expression of our faith in forms of worship, in the liturgy, rather than opt for formulas and definitions, common in both Latin and Protestant circles. Eucharistic action, not rationalistic confessional statement, is at the heart of who we are.

Time and again the Jesus of the gospels is revealed as one who attends to the facts. His fiercest and most sustained conflicts are with those religious persons who are the self-appointed defenders of ready-made doctrines and formulas, perversely refusing to attend to the facts, employing their doctrines like bludgeons. Jesus, by contrast, though he is well-schooled in the law and prophets, meets with people, enters their homes, eats with them, takes seriously the messy and joyous circumstances and events of peoples’ actual lives. Confronted by ordinary need on the holy day it is this synthesis of doctrine and facts that enables Jesus to declare that the Sabbath was made for people, not the other way around.^{xvi} Thinking theologically always produces liberation: “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven [ie. those who *think* theologically] is like a householder who brings out of their treasure what is new and what is old.”^{xvii}

Arguably, the most urgent theological thinking required of all Christians at this 21st century junction is to take seriously the relatively new facts, unknown to the Biblical writers, of being creatures at home on a finite planet in a staggeringly-vast and expanding evolutionary cosmos.

16 JESUS

JESUS may seem to be making a very late appearance in these reflections, though, actually, everything I have said thus far has implicitly involved Jesus. But what can be said about Jesus explicitly, on so small a canvas and from vast libraries on this subject! Without doubt Jesus the fully alive person made a life-changing and indelible impact, wherever he went, and especially on those least acceptable to the religious and political establishments. Jesus' unswerving faithfulness to the divine calling transformed the lives of others. Moreover, this impact has endured throughout two millennia.

Perhaps we struggle to come to grips with the bewildering array of titles ascribed to Jesus – 'Son of Man', 'Son of God', 'Christ' (Messiah), 'Lord' (Kurios), 'Wisdom'. In spite of the orthodox conciliar settlement the creedal attempts to define Jesus' ontological status (the nature of his being) probably leave most of us baffled. 'Bodily resurrection' of Christ may divide Christians on party lines, nevertheless there is no Christian and no church apart from Jesus' resurrection. The 'scandal of particularity' of God being 'constricted into maleness', and all the horrendous and violent consequences of patriarchal power which this has fuelled in the history of the church, may continue to thwart the gospel proclamation – nevertheless, the ordinary fleshiness of Jesus' bodily life, death and resurrection make all the difference to theology, faith and the future. His was a real life, not the conjuring trick of a magician.

What matters about this real, faithful and sacrificial life is that the revelation in Jesus means that humankind could never conceive of God in the same way again. In five very specific ways Jesus' life, death and resurrection revolutionised human understanding of God. (1) God could no longer be regarded as inaccessible, a distant and manipulating deity in the sky – God became one of us, taking human flesh, eating and drinking, laughing and crying with us. (2) God's absolute One-ness, through Christ, came to be experienced as "a lover, a beloved, and love", in the saying of St Augustine. (3) God could no longer be regarded as unchangeable – Jesus' crucifixion-resurrection revealing that God's sameness does not mean terminal monotony, does not deny evolution – for being includes becoming. (4) In Jesus Christians realised that God could no longer be regarded as unaffected by events and history ('impassable', the technical term), that God's omnipotence is not like the human projections of power – God's absolute freedom has to be what God is in God's self-giving, even in self-abandonment, and Jesus reveals that what God does is identical with what God is, that God is Christ-like, and in God is no un-Christlikeness at all. (5) Finally, and most crucially, Jesus revealed that the Kingdom of God is not on a distant galaxy but as near as our breath – heaven, eternal life and salvation are not external, rocketship realities, rather, these are native in the human soul. The Jesus revelation makes all the difference to how we see ourselves and each other – and how we will live.

17 COMMUNITY

A parish's patronal festival always focuses attention on our being a community. From very early on in the life of the church small gatherings of Christians came to recognise the witness of particular persons, Saints among the community of all the saints. Patron saints are sources of inspiration and hope, signs of encouragement for the faithful. No doubt a martyr patron saint will be both assuring and inspirational for a church community facing persecution itself. We are so blessed that we do not face persecution. Nevertheless, no matter who the saint, the patronage inevitably becomes a part of the charism, the gift, of the parish community.

What a privilege it is to be a member of a parish community, where the doors are opened wide, where all are welcomed, all respected as God's beloved children, where the dignity and worth of all people is celebrated – regardless of race, gender, colour, sexuality, or any other distinction. What a joy it is to share with you in this physical space, where all who enter find the stillness and silence which is the heart of God's reconciling love. We who call this 'home', this faith community, belong to each other not because we chose each other, nor because we like each other necessarily, but because Christ the Host invites us to share in a common meal around his Table where there are no favourites and no special places.

The Bible alone doesn't make us members of the Body of Christ. Nor do exalted theological ideas about Christ and God, nor the eucharist as merely a collection of disembodied words and actions. No, what makes us members of the Body of Christ is the fact that we are members of each other, in communion, with and through Christ. For this reason many parishes conduct the periodic review of giving – literally a thanks-giving – at the time of the celebration of their patronal festival.

ThanksGiving is an expression of our gratitude for this common calling and common place at the banquet table of Christ in this particular community. We know that everything we are and everything we have is fundamentally gift, including our sometimes-surprising belonging together. It is for this reason that we review what we can realistically and healthily offer of ourselves – in time, in skills and abilities, in money. The only justification for doing this is to respond to the Love who first loved us, and in recognition of our shared status as guests at Christ's banquet.

18 WORSHIP

THE faith community does not consist of lists of tasks, budgets and the like. In truth, it is a matter of worship. James Alison has described worship as a 'dangerous and de-humanising thing'. Such language may seem shocking. After all, are we not here to worship? Well, yes... and no. As in all things, the devil is in the detail! "Worship," writes Alison, "is a perfectly normal way of being within this violent world, and it is part of the violence".^{xviii} To make his point he cites the Nuremberg rallies as indicative of the cultural normality of worship, and to illustrate how worship works and the effect it is intended to exert on crowds. Though the consequences are (thankfully) less destructive, exactly the same dynamics can be observed in sport, politics, business, and even in churches – since all are equally capable of constructing worlds of rivalry and competition, in which someone or some threatening minority is victimised for the sake of unanimity and 'peace'. Witness political campaigns! Witness football! Witness the Anglican Communion! Worship of this kind is a very normal way of being in the world.

But True Worship – which is the liturgy of the eucharist – undermines all worship, all our competitiveness, rivalry, anxiety and fear. Whereas worship is for the benefit of 'party officials' of one kind or another, True Worship liberates us from rivalrous and competitive imaginations. Whereas worship is designed to take us out of ordinary life for a time, in some form of temple, True Worship is the pattern of an entire lifetime which enables us to live fully and freely in ordinary life, everywhere. Whereas worship aims to create a feeling of togetherness and attempts to coerce a crowd into some future action, with True Worship no achievement is necessary because it is the celebration that something has already happened. Whereas worship requires stage-managed emotion and must be 'exciting', True Worship detoxifies us and relaxes us into the quiet knowledge that Christ crucified is 'just there'. Whereas worship always strives for unanimity by the loss of individual identity and by making enemies and victims, True Worship is centred in Christ the Forgiving Victim who does not demand unanimity, and who peels away comforting myths and false belonging. Whereas worship builds false and premature camaraderie through some group ecstasy, True Worship is the gradual, gentle, slow basking in the beauty of particularity which enables us to celebrate the strange uniqueness of all. Finally, whereas worship aims to comfort us with some larger myth in which we all know the outcome, True Worship is more like a 'jagged edge', a willing celebration of the contingent, the brave, the unimagined, the not-yet, the risky, undermining all comforting myth and leading us into the life of the One who inaugurated the New Creation.

19 SALVATION

SALVATION is Christian business. For Christians salvation is about Christ, who Christ is and what Christ does – that is to say, Christology. Salvation is that special branch of Christology focussed on ‘atonement’. Entire libraries have been written on atonement, and I make no attempt to sum all that up here! There is no Christianity without atonement. The idea of the Divine-human relationship in some way requiring reconciliation, and God’s work in Christ to restore a separation, is atonement. All orthodox Christianity agrees on this much. But atonement doctrine has a problematic history. Though the councils of the church and creeds have never attempted to define the method by which God-in-Christ accomplishes what God accomplishes, the church since the time of St Anselm of Canterbury has been infected by a particular theory of atonement, the basic contours of which are instantly recognisable.

In short, it goes like this: God made a good world, but humans were disobedient (‘original sin’). God the judge requires that a just payment must be paid for the price of the sin (a ‘penalty’). Unfortunately the sin was so heinous that no human could pay the necessary price. So God sent his only Son to pay that price (as a ‘substitute’). The necessary blood sacrifice appeases God’s demand for blood (‘satisfaction’). The shorthand description for this theory of what God was doing in Christ is known as “penal substitutionary atonement”.

Tragically, this theory – because it is founded on medieval Scholastic legalism, and because it has immense power as a means of control – has enslaved many Christians. Some churches demand absolute allegiance to this theory of atonement. The truth is that this theory of atonement is violent, has fuelled and justified violent, repressive, coercive and unjust human behaviour wherever it takes hold, and is utterly inconsistent with a Christlike God. Furthermore, this violent theory places no responsibility whatsoever on us in relation to others and the creation. All that is required is belief in the theory, up in the head, by gloriously isolated, though mutually self-assured, ‘saved’ individuals.

Growing up, growing out of this violent and manipulative theory of atonement may be the most pressing agenda for the church, since many good people are repelled by Christian faith not because of what they perceive in Jesus but because this virulent atonement theory is both intellectually-scandalous and behaviourally-violent. Liberation from slavery takes no easy path – Israel’s liberation from Egypt involved many years of meandering uncertainty. There are no easy answers, though there are a great many worthwhile ideas in exploration. What helps is to re-connect mind and body, as God re-connects heaven and earth, flesh and Spirit, in the Body of Christ. Whatever atonement is, it is certainly not merely an idea, a theory, a proposition, a belief. Atonement can only be known as an experience, a fleshy and down-to-earth experience.

20 COMMUNION OF SAINTS

WE believe in the ‘communion of saints’ – so we affirm in the Apostles’ Creed. The Feast of All Saints (November 1) marks a turning point in the liturgical year. After about five months of green-time Sundays after Pentecost, All Saints inevitably shifts our attention in the direction of Advent and the Feast of Incarnation. These rather mundane calendar facts alert us to a vital theological principle which underpins both the church’s year and the feast of All Saints – namely, that Christian faith, as Karl Barth insisted, is thoroughly eschatological (relating to final things) in character. The acclamation in the middle of the Great Thanksgiving Prayer which is prayed in most parts of the English-speaking church recalls the faith community to this fact at every eucharist – ‘Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!’ In the company of all the saints we are reminded that in Christ all time is united, the past and the future coincident in the present moment of grace.

‘Saints’ are that ‘cloud of witnesses’ who surround us and precede us, who intercede for us and who call us to live fully in the present. The Church has tended to use the word ‘saints’ in two distinct, though ultimately connected, ways – any Christian who is baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ; and those particular individuals who have signally manifested the Spirit of conforming to Christ. The extraordinary variety of those who the Church has called ‘saints’ warns against any rigidly-narrow idea of sainthood, and clearly affirms the comprehensiveness of human diversity.

Nevertheless, the central characteristic of the saints is self-giving love, and the martyr remains the norm for sainthood – the Greek *μαρτυρος* *marturos* means ‘witness’. The Church’s witness as the community of saints is the authority to bless. Moreover, it is the authority to bless the whole community and to pray for the whole community’s ultimate and final redemption. Clearly, when the church deems it fit to bless battleships and fighter-bombers but refuses to bless gay and lesbian people it has forfeited its authority and betrayed its witness. The Church’s only true authority is self-giving love, to which countless saints witness.

It should be clear that All Saints is not an occasion for sentimental nostalgia for the past. This is not the Church’s ‘memorial day’, just another historical commemoration such as is made for the fallen dead, or any other human accomplishment. All Saints is not about human accomplishment at all in fact, but the accomplishment of God in Christ, by the power of the Spirit. All Saints, wrote John Macquarrie, is the affirmation that “the Church commits itself to a future in which it must lose itself in order to transcend itself and become the Kingdom of God”.^{xix} We believe in the ‘communion of saints’ as those who witness to, and call us to, this loss of self in Christ.

21 RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

WE believe in the resurrection of the body – that’s what we affirm in the ‘Apostles’ Creed’. The idea of *bodily* resurrection is contentious in church circles, evoking extremes which either fanatically literalise or carelessly dismiss the bodiliness of resurrection. Christian teaching has always been very clear – resurrection is either bodily, or there is simply no such thing. Furthermore, as St Paul reminds us, without resurrection there is no christian faith at all.^{xx} Such statements may dissatisfy both literalists and materialist-rationalists, nevertheless the church has always been very careful to observe the limits of what it can and cannot say about resurrection. The fact that some want to claim too much, in both directions, ought not surprise us. Nevertheless, as with all healthy theology, we are often able to say more clearly what something isn’t, and only hint at what it is. “The resurrection is not resuscitation,” wrote Archbishop Rowan Williams, “it is the gift of a new kind of life, the life that exists on the far side of death and hell, of destruction and disintegration”.^{xxi} Notice how one kind of data is clearly rejected, while the other is really only gestured towards?

Even so, there are some very clear and unambiguous things that can be said. Christ’s resurrection means that he is no longer a prisoner to a past, nor to a tribe or ethnic group or nation. Resurrection means that he belongs to all peoples, all times, all places. In the One who is Alpha and Omega there is absolutely no exclusion of any kind, there is no violence – including the violence which humans justify in God’s name. The church may exclude and persecute people, but in the resurrected Christ even those who I have excluded are embraced. When it comes to the question of the body, the Scriptures are unambiguous – Christ bears the wounds of his own death, to those who betrayed him, and with the same wounded hands blesses them and shares at table with them.^{xxii} The fact is that only in having a body of some sort is it possible to exist at all. Energy and matter, quantum physics tell us, ‘slip and slide’ in terms of our capacity to measure them, but this does not mean that when we can only accurately measure energy that matter no longer exists.

It is worth remembering that the background to resurrection is always impossibility, always a defiance of the absurd, above all by openness of mind and heart, wrote H A Williams, “the willingness to abandon even what seems the most sacred of our prejudices, the willingness to think and feel what we are out afresh”.^{xxiii} Finally, resurrection is bodily here and now – nothing to do with delayed gratification or crystal-ball gazing. Jesus’ flesh, his resurrected body, is the bread of God’s goodness – the very reason that eucharist is the source and summit of christian faith – eat, and live!

22 LIFE EVERLASTING

THROUGHOUT this series of reflections I have been meditating on our baptismal life as the community of faith. I come now to this final article on faith. We believe, so we affirm in the 'Apostles' Creed', in "the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting". Christian doctrines are expressions of ultimate truths, but in the hands of a rationalistic, individualistic or puritanical mindset they so readily become dead things, prisons for the soul. Throughout this series I have endeavoured to peel back some of the layers of religion in the head, religion for solo individuals, and religion as security device. In this final reflection attention turns to 'life everlasting'.

In a tragic perversion of the gospel, life everlasting is subject to two distortions - the portrayal of a reward in some future time and place for the labours, sufferings and moral restraint in this 'fallen world'; and as the reward for gloriously-isolated super-righteous individuals. Curiously, both of these distortions - dualism and individualism - are routinely paraded at funerals, by both card-carrying Christians and so-called non-believers alike. The first requires the radical separation of heaven and earth, the divine and the human, the flesh and the spirit. This is actually the un-doing of 'God with us', the reversal of Incarnation. The second distortion makes of salvation an individualistic possession - "Blessed assurance", as the 19th century hymn asserts (as do so many others) is "mine" - "I and my Saviour happy and blest". 'Heaven' is so easily a product, peddled to individual spiritual consumers - ironically not so different from the products of those who want to sell us ice creams, cars, dream holidays, and so on.

The New Testament, by contrast, speaks of life everlasting in thoroughly holistic and communal terms - the completion or fulfilment which is the promise for the whole created order, the cosmos, the one-ness of all things in God. "The whole creation waits in eager longing..." ^{xxiv} "so that God may be all in all..." ^{xxv} "in him all things hold together..." ^{xxvi} "so that they may be one as we are one... that all may be completely one." ^{xxvii} There is no place in this cosmic vision for private heaven, nor can heaven be another time and place - "the Kingdom of Heaven is upon you!" ^{xxviii}

The unitive vision of Christian faith does not, however, annihilate individual identity. "We who are many are one body in Christ..." we say when the Bread is broken. ^{xxix} The mystery of our faith is that we matter as the many, who are simultaneously being drawn into the One. Everlasting life is the fulfilment of each of us as unique individuals who are learning to live, in the way of Jesus, by pouring ourselves out for the life of the world - and in this way contributing to the completion, the fulfilment of the whole cosmos. So we conclude where we began, with the liturgy, with eucharist - "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life". ^{xxx}

NOTES

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- i Ramsey M, **The Anglican Spirit**, London: SPCK, 1991, p34.
- ii “The Articles do not say that Holy Scripture contains truth on innumerable subjects not related to salvation, and here we have the difference between the treatment of Scripture by the Anglicans, as represented by Hooker, and the Puritans.” Ramsey M, p24.
- iii Acts 10-11
- iv **New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa**, Auckland: Collins Liturgical, 1989, p425.
- v The Windsor Report, paragraph 55,
http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/section_b/p4.cfm
- vi The Windsor Report, paragraph 57,
http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/section_b/p4.cfm
- vii This section is a slightly modified version of an article written by Fr David G Wood, parish priest of St John’s, Fremantle, Western Australia.
- viii Taylor J V, **The Uncancelled Mandate: Four Bible Studies on Christian Mission for the Approaching Millennium**, London: Church House Publishing, 1998, p3.
- ix Taylor J V, p4.
- x Taylor J V, p13.
- xi Taylor J V, p20.
- xii Taylor J V, p30.
- xiii Taylor J V, p40.
- xiv John 3:8
- xv Carnley P F, **Reflections in Glass: Trends and Tensions in the Contemporary Anglican Church**, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2004, p29.
- xvi Mark 2:27
- xvii Matthew 13:52
- xviii James Alison’s article ‘Worship in a Violent World’ forms the basis for this reflection; in **Undergoing God: dispatches from the scene of a break-in**, New York: Continuum, 2006, pp35-49. This quote on p35.
- xix Macquarrie J, **Principles of Christian Theology**, London: SCM, 1966, p359.
- xx 1 Corinthians 15:12-14
- xxi Williams R, **A Ray of Darkness**, Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1995, p57.
- xxii Luke 24:30,39; John 20:27
- xxiii Williams H A, **True Resurrection**, London: Mitchell Beazley Limited, 1972, pp56-57.
- xxiv Romans 8:19
- xxv 1 Corinthians 15:28
- xxvi Colossians 1:17
- xxvii John 17:11,23
- xxviii Matthew 12:28
- xxix 1 Corinthians 10:16-17
- xxx John 6:54



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