

REFLECTIONS OF A PARISHIONER



ST WINEFRIDE'S PARISH, NESTON

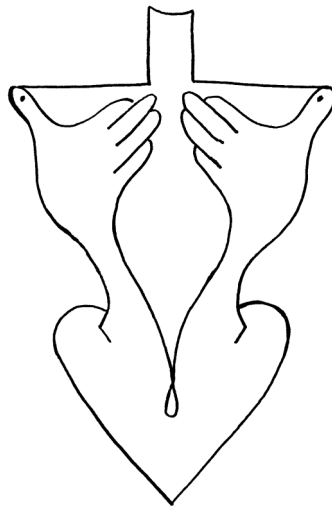
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PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Oh Heavenly Father, how good you are!
You have blessed me all my life.
You surrounded me with people, who loved me,
You gave me parents, who through their love for me,
Taught me to know and to love You.
You gave me siblings who have always been there for me.
You gave me a faithful wife who has loved and cherished me.
You gave us sons and daughters
In whom we are very proud.
You gave us grandchildren in whom we have delighted.
You gave us family and friends
Who have enriched our lives.
You gave us a home that has been filled with love and laughter.
You didn't make us rich,
But You have always given us more than enough.
And You asked little in return.
You didn't ask me to change the world,
Or to do great things.
You asked only that I love You and those in my life.
And I do, with all my heart.
O Lord, You have given me so much
And I have so little to give You in return.
I have only myself.
And I offer myself to You.
All that I am, all that I have, all that I do.
But I am weak, timid and sinful.
Strengthen and encourage me that I may dedicate my life to You.
Grant me the wisdom to always know what is the right thing to do,
And the courage to do it for Your sake and in Your name.



MEDITATION BEFORE A PICTURE OF CHRIST: THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

William Holman Hunt



When I look at this picture I notice, on the horizon, that the sky is brightening. The sun is rising; a new day is dawning, a time for hope. I see the trees in the garden. They seem twisted, bent, deformed. They remind me of my life which is also deformed because of the things I have done and the things that I have failed to do. In the foreground there is a figure dressed in priestly attire. The golden thread of his cloak suggests he may be a king. The crown he wears confirms it. The crown is one of thorns and look at the wounds in his hands and feet and the halo around his head. It is the risen Christ, The Light of the world. My Lord and my God! I am reminded of a verse from a lovely hymn;-

*“See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did ere such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown”?*

He is knocking at a door that has no handle. The weeds have grown high around it. It has not been opened for a long time. His face is sad. The risen Christ is still suffering! His eyes disturb me, they look deep into my very soul, patiently waiting and pleading. This divine saviour, this healer of the sick, this omnipotent being, this helpless God cannot open the door without my help, for it is the door to my heart and only I can let him in. I want to open it. I want to throw myself at his feet and surrender myself completely to him but I am afraid. I am weak, timid, sinful. I cling on tightly to the things of this world. What will he ask of me if I submit my will to his? Perhaps I will not be strong enough and yet I know He will not ask of me more than I am capable of.

O Lord, Your love ---“so amazing, so Divine, demands my soul, my life, my all”.

O Lord, let this be the day that I find the courage to open wide the door to you and let you into my heart. Give me the courage and the strength to dedicate my life to you. Give me an awareness of the needs of all those I come into contact with. O Lord, let your light shine on me and through me to brighten the lives of all those around me. Give me the grace to always put them first. Give me the wisdom to always know the right thing to do. O Lord, let this be the day.

**THE WAY OF THE CROSS
FOURTH STATION**



THE WAY OF THE CROSS

The Fourth Station- Jesus meets his mother

For me, this is the most moving station. Perhaps I should be moved more by the twelfth station- Jesus dies on the cross- but that represents a mystery too great for me to understand. That God loves us so much He not only shared our humanity but He also suffered and died a cruel and humiliating death for us. My uneducated mind cannot grasp the vastness of the universe nor can my feeble mind begin to comprehend the depth of love that God, the creator of the universe, has for us. I have seen my children in pain and distressed and have felt the frustration of not being able to ease it. I have felt their pain more than if it were my own. I cannot compare this pain to the devastating horror of what Mary felt but it gives me a small insight into her suffering.

As Mary waits at the roadside, she has not seen her son since before his arrest. Nothing could have prepared her for the sight which she was about to behold, her son's beautiful face now bloodstained and bruised almost beyond recognition, his strong upright body now bent and broken, struggling to bear the weight of the cross. How could this happen? Her beautiful son, how could they do this to him? She remembers the words of Gabriel "He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High....He will rule the house of Jacob for ever". She knew him better than any other knew him. She had such happy loving memories of when he was a child and she held him in her arms. There were such wonderful, treasured times as he grew up to become a beautiful young man. She knew how special he was. How could they do this to him now? She remembers how Simeon predicted "...a sword will pierce your soul too". Oh what a terrible sword it is! She wants to run to him, cradle him in her arms and comfort him, but she can do nothing. Why must this happen? This is not God's will. This is the cruel and selfish will of man. They are afraid of him. They do not understand him. They want to kill him.

As Jesus approaches, He does not want his mother to see him like this, battered and bruised. He wants to spare her the anguish but when he sees her at the roadside He is comforted and consoled. As their eyes meet, it is a moment that seems to last an eternity and yet it is only for a second. What love there is in that look and what sorrow! Oh what a dreadful, beautiful moment!

O Lord, I too made your cross a little heavier to bear, Every time I submitted to my own selfish desires I made it harder for you. Every time I failed to help a fellow man in need, I joined those who jeered you. O Lord, forgive me. Let me now join Simon of Cyrene to help you carry your cross. With your help, I will try to follow the little way of St. Therese of Lisieux by doing all the ordinary things I do today extraordinarily well and offer them to you as little gifts to comfort you.

O Mary, most sorrowful mother, before he died, Jesus gave you to us to be our mother. Help us now to be truly sorry for all the times we have caused him pain. As you stood at the foot of the cross when Jesus died, be with us when we breathe our last breath.

THE PRODIGAL SON

Rembrandt



THE PRODIGAL SON

The other day, as I listened to the gospel being read, I was suddenly moved by the story being told. It was the parable of the prodigal son. How arrogant the younger son was, who asked his father for his share of the inheritance. He believed he was owed his share but the inheritance was not something that the sons had an automatic right to, it could only be given freely by the father. In his desire for freedom he gave no thought to the pain he would bring to his father. He was self-centred and ungrateful.

Throughout his life his father had provided for all his needs but he wanted more. The father could have refused the son's request but he knew that if he did it would cause resentment and bitterness. The hardest thing for any parent is to allow his offspring the freedom to make their own mistakes. He knew that he could lose his son forever but he was confident that at some stage his son would come to appreciate the love and care and security that would be waiting for him at home. When the son had wasted all the money on a life of debauchery he did come to his senses and realised that money could not buy him friends or happiness and began to understand how much he had thrown away by leaving home. He knew also that he did not deserve a place in his father's home but he believed his father was a merciful father. He believed that if he confessed his sins and showed true remorse his father would not turn him away.

The father was indeed a merciful and forgiving father. His love was so great that when he saw his son coming, he did not wait but rushed out to meet the son and hardly gave him time to make his confession. His joy was so great he declared a celebration. He wanted his whole household to share his happiness.

The elder son is the one to whom most of us relate to. When he hears of his brother's return and of the celebration thrown for him he feels rebuffed. Nobody has ever killed the fattened calf and given a feast for him. He feels hurt and jealous. "I have slaved for you", he says. Is that how he thought of his father, a slave master? "I have never once disobeyed your orders". Is that why he stayed with his father, because it was his duty? Where is the love? He has been with the father all the time his brother has been missing, had he not noticed his father's grief? Had he not seen the pain in his father's eyes? If he loved his father as his father loved him, would he not now be glad that the heartache was now ended?

There are others in this story, the ones to whom the parable is being told, the scribes, the Pharisees, the judgemental, those who look down on people less fortunate than themselves. All their lives they have followed the rules, they have obeyed the laws. They despise those who, for some reason, have fallen by the wayside. They have no love or compassion for the poor, the sick, the disabled, the sinners.

O Lord, I am like the scribes and the Pharisees. I have said my prayers and attended mass and received the sacraments but I have also criticised others for their faults and ignored my own failings. I have lacked compassion for those less fortunate than myself and have not been aware of their needs. All my life you have showered me with blessings and surrounded me with people who have loved me and I have done so little to show my gratitude. I am like the Pharisee in the temple who considered himself better than the publican.

O Lord, teach me to be humble. Teach me to see the good in others, not their imperfections. O Lord, I know I cannot earn a place in your kingdom by my own merits but by your suffering and death on the cross, you have earned it for me. I can only attain it by loving you and loving those who share my life, O Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.



THE CENTURION

The Centurion was a wealthy man. He had position and authority. He was used to being in control. Used to giving orders and telling people what to do. He had been hardened in battle, had seen men killed, perhaps he, also, had killed. He was an officer in the occupying army of Rome. He knew how much he was feared and resented by the Jewish people. And yet he was a man of compassion, enough to be concerned for his servant who was sick.

He felt uncomfortable about approaching this man. How would this “healer” react towards him? He had heard many stories of the wonders he performed. He did not want to just take the word of the storytellers, he wanted to see for himself so he watched Jesus from the back of the crowd. As he watched, he began to realise that this was no ordinary man. Although he had few possessions, he spoke and acted with authority. It was easy for the centurion to make his way through the crowd. As usual, people bowed to his authority and stepped aside to let him through.

When he stood before him, he did not tell Jesus to come with him, nor did he ask him to come. He looked into Jesus’ eyes and did not see what he expected to see. There was no fear there, only reassurance, no resentment but compassion, no hatred but immense love. He also saw his own reflection, his weakness, his lack of control. He, who commanded others and influenced events, realised in that moment that he could not control everything in his life yet here was a man who could control the wind and the rain, who could calm the seas. In that look he realised that here was a man with a greater authority than any he had known. Oh what a life changing moment for the centurion. He addresses Jesus with respect and great humility.

“Sir,” he says pleadingly, “my servant is lying at home paralysed, and in great pain.”

It wasn’t an order or a request but a simple statement of fact. Without hesitation Jesus offers to accompany him to his home in order to cure the servant. The centurion then makes his great profession of faith, one so profound it is repeated every day at mass by countless number of people.

“Sir, I am not worthy to have you under my roof; just give the word and my servant will be cured.”

Jesus is amazed by the honesty and sincerity of the man and passes the centurion a great compliment.

“Nowhere in Israel have I found faith like this.”

Jesus then tells him to go home and because of his faith the servant will be cured. Nothing more is ever told of the centurion but we can be sure that he would never have forgotten the moment he looked into the eyes of God.

O Lord, I am not worthy and yet you still come to me in Holy Communion. O that my life could be transformed as was the centurion’s, but I know that every time I receive you in the Blessed Sacrament I become a little stronger. Make me more and more aware of your real presence. O Jesus, enter into my heart, teach me.



TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

You have the message of eternal life.

Jesus' followers had increased in number recently. He was different from other leaders. He was not a military leader like Joshua. He offered no threat to the Romans, He was a humble man. There was nothing false about him. He did not stand in the market square pretending to fast and to pray. He told stories and painted pictures in words of what the Kingdom of Heaven was like and how easy it was to reach. He was approachable. He mixed with the people and was not afraid to touch lepers and the disabled. He dined with tax collectors and sinners. He did not condemn the woman accused of adultery but simply told her to sin no more. He was not a rich man, he had no personal possessions but He was able to feed thousands of people from just a few loaves and fishes. But this new idea was ridiculous. How could they eat his flesh and drink his blood? It was impossible and yet He insisted that that was the only way to gain eternal life. He must be insane. Many turned away and left him. This teaching was intolerable.

Peter, also, was finding it hard to understand what Jesus was asking them to accept. Peter was not an educated man; he had not read books or studied. He was a simple, down-to-earth fisherman. All he knew was what he had learned from his parents, his family and life. He knew about the sea and the tides. He knew about weather and could tell when a storm was approaching. He could navigate by the stars. This new teaching of Jesus was something he could not comprehend but, for Peter, it was the singer not the song. He would probably never understand the song but he knew well the singer. He had been with Jesus for three years now. Jesus had personally invited Peter to join him. He had listened to every word Jesus had taught and had seen every miracle he had performed. Jesus had even changed his name from Simon to Peter. To him, Jesus was both master and a dear friend. With every fibre of his being he believed in Jesus and would follow Him to the ends of the earth, no matter how hard the road would become. When Jesus turned to the twelve to ask them if they too wanted to leave, Peter answered for them.

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe: we know that you are the Holy one of God”.

Lord, like Peter's, my faith is a simple one. I do not always understand. Some times I wonder why you put so many difficulties in front of us. I believe in you and put all my trust in you, but I am weak. Walk with me and when I get tired and the road is difficult, O Lord, carry me.

ADORATION OF THE MAGI



THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

A couple of days before the feast of The Epiphany we had visitors to our church. On Friday 5th January, as we entered church for morning prayers, there in the middle of the junction where two aisles crossed stood statues of the Magi. It was impossible to avoid them. Some people expressed anxiety about knocking them over or causing damage to them while others said how inconvenient it was. Fr. Ravi explained later that we were meant to be disturbed. He said that the Magi were at a crossroads in their lives trying to fathom which way they should go. On Saturday morning when we entered church, the statues were now standing next to the lectern where passages from the sacred scriptures would be read during mass. Fr. Ravi asked us to consider what the significance of placing them there in front of the lectern was. The following morning, of course, they had arrived at the crib and stood in awe of the baby lying there.

The wise men from the east were obviously well educated men. They had studied astronomy and astrology and had interpreted something special in the stars. However, their wisdom must have come from more than the knowledge they had acquired from books. Deep within them there must have been a revelation that something great was going to happen, something that would affect the whole of mankind. Something so great that they felt compelled to start out on a journey not knowing where it would lead or what was ahead of them.

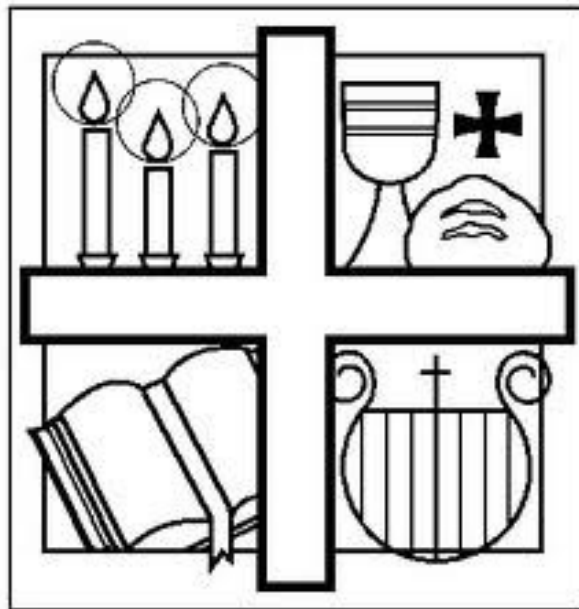
As they neared the crossroads, perhaps they were having doubts. Perhaps the courage of their convictions was wavering. Perhaps the crossroads was the place where they all met for the first time. As they rested there for the night, they would have talked together and shared with each other the reasons for making their journey. It would have been a comfort and an encouragement to each one that they shared a belief. I think that is the reason they decided to travel on together.

They must have been rich and influential men for when they arrived in Jerusalem they caused quite a stir. They were received by King Herod who called his advisors together to discuss how they could help the visitors and to find out why they had travelled so far. For guidance they consulted the sacred scriptures. Here they found how the prophets of old had announced the coming of the saviour of Israel. They learned that a king was to be born in Bethlehem. The travellers were not of the Jewish faith but found in the scriptures the answers they had been looking for. They were reassured and encouraged and even more determined to find this king.

When they reached Bethlehem and found Jesus, it was not what they expected. The gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were gifts worthy of a king but here they found no palace, no throne, no servants but abject poverty. They found a stable and a baby lying in a manger, surrounded by his parents, the animals and humble shepherds. The great miracle is that these erudite men were able to accept what they saw before them and immediately fell to their knees before the baby and did him homage. They had come from the richness of Herod's palace to the squalor of the stable and they were able to accept what they found there.

I believe that from the moment of conception, deep within us, is an awareness of God. John the Baptist, before he was born, was aware of the presence of the son of God in Mary's womb. The more we let God into our lives the more we feel compelled to search for him. We travel through life on different paths, from different beginnings. Sometimes it gets very difficult and we doubt that we are on the right path. Often we meet other travellers who give us comfort and encouragement. On most journeys we need a map or some directions to guide us to our destination. The scriptures are the perfect map to help us through difficult periods.

O Lord, open our minds that we in this modern, scientific, hedonistic world may be able to accept the things that You have revealed deep within us. May we never fail to help another in time of need and may we always have someone to help us when we are in difficulty.



THE INVISIBLE MAN

*Christ be the vision in eyes that see me,
In ears that hear me, Christ ever be.*

It is easy to do good deeds, anyone can do them, but it is much harder to do them for the right reasons. Often we do good things for bad reasons. When I was younger and in a group or at a meeting, because I was self-conscious and lacking confidence, I would try to make myself invisible for fear of being asked a question or asked to do something that would embarrass me. I was often criticised for speaking too softly and told that people couldn't hear what I was saying.

As I grew older, although still shy and self-conscious, I gained enough confidence to become more involved in parish activities. I joined the Knights of St. Columba and was soon elected to office. I served three years as Grand Knight and during that time was invited to do a number of other things. One of the things I was asked to do was to read at mass. Although I was nervous I found that I did have a voice and I could project it. I was able to read articulately and received many compliments. I was also invited to join the catechist group and did a number of presentations for the parents of first communicants. My parish priest invited me to be a Eucharistic minister and I was one of the group that was first to be commissioned in the parish.

All these things made me feel exhilarated and I enjoyed the respect I received and the esteem in which I was held. I have come to believe that when we say yes to the Holy Spirit, no matter how hesitantly, He not only gives us the means to carry out what he asks of us, but also draws us into more than we originally expected. I have come to realise that every good deed, every little act of kindness I perform, I am only able to do it because He has given me the opportunity and the means to do it. I can take no credit myself for anything I do as it the gifts of The Holy Spirit that makes it possible.

Now before I read at mass, I ask the Holy Spirit to guide my eyes that I may see clearly the words of the holy scriptures, guide my tongue that I may speak them articulately, guide my mind that I may speak them with understanding and guide my heart that I may speak them with integrity. I ask Him also that I may do it for his honour and glory and that I may seek or receive no praise or appreciation for anything I do.

Now that I am in the autumn of my years I try to make myself invisible again for different reasons. I try to be the forgotten man. The one that is always taken for granted the one that is always there ready to step in when a colleague is absent, the one that never refuses a request. I pray each day that Jesus will shine through me on those around me and make me...

... preach..... without preaching - not by words, but by my example and by the catching force, the sympathetic influence, of what I do.¹

O Jesus, meek and humble of heart, hear me
From the desire of being esteemed, deliver me, Jesus.
From the desire of being praised, deliver me, Jesus.



MY SOUL'S DESIRE

"My one hope and trust is that I shall never have to admit defeat, but that now as always I shall have the courage for Christ to be glorified in my body, whether by my life or by my death." Philipians

St. Paul admits to a dilemma. He tells us that his life is Christ but also that he wants his life to be ended so that he can be with Jesus in a complete way. However, he realises that if his life here on Earth is effective in bringing more people to know and love Jesus, he does not know what he should choose. He realises that for himself he wants to be gone and be with Christ but he also realises that to stay alive is a much more urgent need for the community he is serving. He feels sure that God wants him to continue his work in helping the church to progress in faith.

When I hear of a loved one who is seriously ill or struggling to survive an accident or a major operation, I am not sure what I should be praying for. Should I pray for that person's recovery? That might deny him or her early entry to God's kingdom. But then again, how do I know if that person is ready to make his or her final commitment to God? And what about the family? Perhaps their need is greater. Perhaps they still need the support of that person. As for me, what should I want for myself? I do not have a death wish but I am not afraid of death although I may be concerned at the manner of my death, but I must leave that in God's hands. I do not want to suffer as I am not a brave person and yet I want to be with God.

What disturbs me is that there will be loved ones left behind who will suffer the pain of bereavement, loved ones who at present rely on my support. I can only pray that they will be comforted and consoled, strengthened and encouraged by my passing as I have been by the deaths of those that I have loved. I do not know if my life has been as inspirational to others as were the lives of my parents and sisters to me for I am sure they are all now with God. I know that when they died I felt a great loss but also a wonderful feeling of assurance that they had gained eternal salvation. Their deaths, though hard to bear, inspired me and deepened my faith.

I have come to realise that every time we say yes to God, it prepares us a little more for the last Great Amen. I believe that at the moment of death, each one of us will have to make a choice, to be with God or to reject him. Every time we say yes to God in this life we come to know him better. Every time we deny ourselves for the sake of others we come to understand a little better how God loves us. If we spend a lifetime putting others first, we are more able, at the moment of death, to choose God. A soul who throughout its life has given in to its own selfish desires will find it more difficult to make that last unselfish choice. For this reason we must learn to say yes to God and surrender our wills to him.

O Lord, give us the wisdom to always know the right thing to do and the grace and courage to accept whatever you put before us.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, Amen

*This still my souls desire,
Whatever life afford,
To gain my souls desire
And see thy face, O Lord.*



YEAR OF FAITH

Last week I attended a talk given by a retired priest, Mgr Christopher Lightbound. It was the first in a series of talks to be given by different priests throughout the year of faith. The talk was entitled “The Church, then and now” and compared how the church had changed since Vatican II from how it was before. There was a discussion after the talk and it seemed that the general opinion was that Vatican II was a kind of liberation. It made me think of the readings for that week which were taken from the letter of St. Paul to the Galatians in which he compared the law with faith in Jesus Christ. He says “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law”.

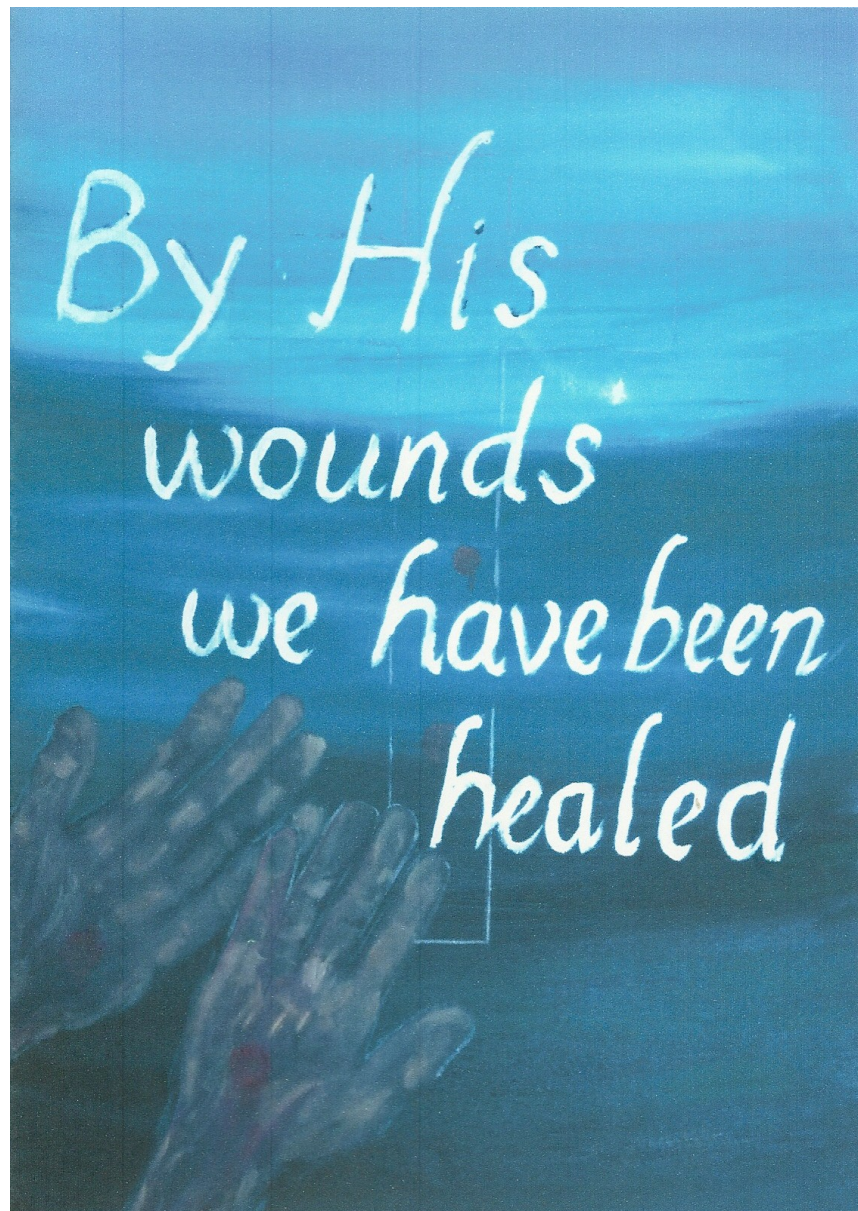
In a way, I think that before Vatican II we lived by the law. We were told what to believe and were told what to do and what not to do. We had no choice. The clergy laid down the law and we, the laity, had to obey or be excluded from taking part in the sacraments. There was a lot of fear preached: fear of eternal damnation: fear that you could not receive Holy Communion if you had not been to confession. Mixed marriages were frowned upon and babies who died without being baptised were believed to be denied heaven and sent to Limbo. Rules about fasting were strictly adhered to. If food had entered the mouth a minute after midnight, you could not receive Holy Communion that day. Non-attendance at mass on Sunday was thought to be a mortal sin. The laity did not participate in the liturgy which was in Latin. Many said their own private prayers while the mass was being performed on the altar by a priest who had his back to the congregation.

I was married with three children when Vatican II began to take effect in the late 60s and early 70s. I think people did feel somewhat liberated. I think the majority of the clergy also felt liberated although there were many, both clergy and laity, who resented and resisted the changes that were taking place. At last we were all, priest and congregation, able to celebrate the mass together in our own native language. We began to understand the true meaning of Eucharist. There were meetings held around the parishes at which we could express our own feelings about faith.

It struck me at that time that for most of us, this was the first opportunity for catechesis since we left formal education. I, myself had a fairly sound religious education through the Christian brothers gaining an “O” level in the subject but nothing after I left school at the age of 16 other than the weekly sermon given by the priest at mass. Now we were being encouraged to think for ourselves and make our own informed decisions. It was encouraging to find that we shared similar views. There was a kind of excitement in the church, an uplift of spirits. We began to attend mass because we wanted to rather than because we were under an obligation to do so. People no longer feared priests and began to think of them as being humble pilgrims like themselves with the same problems and difficulties. I hope we began to understand and love them.

Always, when people are given freedom, there are some who abuse that freedom. There were those who tried to go too far too quickly. We seemed to lose some of the awe and reverence we had for the Blessed Sacrament. People stopped going to confession as often. There are some who believe that the pendulum has swung too far and there seems to be division between those who are happy with the way the church has progressed and those who want to go back. That is a question I cannot answer. I only know that very few of us have a “Road to Damascus” experience as for most of us it is a lifetime of trial and error as we try to learn from our mistakes. We stumble along paths that are sometimes difficult. We often meet people whose path seems to be going in the wrong direction, but I think that if we are truly searching for God whatever paths we are following will eventually lead us all to the same destination.

Although since the 1960s and 70s the church has experienced great difficulties and has been under greater scrutiny than ever before and although many have fallen away from the faith, I believe that the church is stronger and the faith of its fewer members is much greater. I pray that during this year of celebration of the faith we can find ways of drawing more to experience the joy of Eucharist.



JOE'S PICTURE: LENT

At first glance, from a distance, the words are prominent but they seem meaningless. They are a contradiction. Whose are the wounds that have healed and why did I need healing? There has been nothing wrong with me. I am healthy and strong. As I look further into the picture, I see the outstretched arms reaching up, hands wide open, palms upward, pleading, begging. They are like the hands of poor people on the streets: the tramps, the homeless, the hungry. But what has that got to do with me? I am not poor. I'm not rich but I have enough. I have a house and a family. I have enough to feed them and give them a few luxuries now and then. I am alright. I am comfortable with my life. They are not my hands reaching up, and yet, why do I feel uneasy?

As I approach the picture, I see that there is something behind the words. There is an outline of a cross, pieces of rough-cut wood put together to form a crucifix, but how can that be the answer to anything? The wood is dead. Once it was a tree, vibrant and strong: A tree that stood proud and produced fruit, food for people to eat, shade from the midday sun. Now it is dead. The shape is also a symbol of death, a cruel, hideous and shameful death of a criminal. I am drawn closer. There are two small red patches on the cross which represent the one who died. This must be the wondrous cross on which our saviour died. Now I begin to feel remorse because I know that although my body may be whole, deep inside I am broken and sinful. I recall the sins that I have committed but more importantly perhaps, I remember the opportunities I have missed.

I remember times when I have been "holier than thou", but with all the advantages I have had, all the blessings our Heavenly Father has showered on me, I should be holy, but I am not. I turn away from the picture and look around at the people who are assembling for morning mass. I have come to know them so well and I am humbled by their faith and reverence before the Blessed Sacrament. These are the holy ones. As I become more aware of my own brokenness, I feel a deep sorrow for I know that it was because of my sins that He had to suffer and die.

I turn again towards the picture and suddenly I am filled with Joy. I realise that it was because of our broken humanity that He came to live and die for us. I remember the lesson that St. Paul taught us that in our weakness we are strongest. If we can recognise and accept our brokenness and turn to Him for forgiveness, then we are healed.

O Jesus, son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner.



JOE'S PICTURE: ALLELUIA

I do not find it hard to believe in the resurrection. From my early childhood I was taught how Jesus had suffered and died for us and had risen again on the third day. There have been times in my life when I have experienced moments of disbelief in God and have even tried to not believe, but I found that I could not “not” believe. Having accepted that God is, I tried to understand what kind of God he could be. The conclusion I came to was that He was a benevolent God. Why would he create us and not love his creation. Naturally He would want us to love him in return but we must be free to choose. A forced love is no love. Knowing that God is love makes it easier to accept the mysteries of virgin birth, redemption and resurrection. To me it even seems logical that God would want to share in our humanity in order that we could have a share in his divinity.

It is easy for me to come to these conclusions after two thousand years of guidance from the church, but what must those first disciples have thought when they found the tomb empty. At first they thought the body had been stolen. After all the suffering his enemies had inflicted on Jesus through the previous week, here now was a further desecration. St. John, the beloved apostle, was the first to realise what had happened. He understood that Jesus had risen from the dead just as he had prophesied. Not all the disciples were able to accept it so easily, even when told that Jesus had been seen by members of their own community. We know that Thomas refused to believe until he could see for himself and touch the wounds that the nails had made in Jesus’ hands and feet. When he finally encountered Jesus, he made his great profession of faith “my Lord and my God”. It must have been very difficult to understand even though they had been Jesus’ closest companions during the last three years. It was necessary for Jesus to continue to appear to them for some time after his death and finally to send the Holy Spirit to confirm them in their faith.

There are many people who have never known Jesus and have no knowledge of the Holy Spirit. Many who are searching for something but do not know what it is they are searching for. How can we help them if they will not listen to us? I think that we have to be such shining examples of Christ’s teaching that they will be attracted to us and to the way we live. We have to pray that Jesus’ light will shine on us and through us: to “preach ----not with words but by our example”*. We must guard against hypocrisy and try to be above reproach: to do everything joyfully, lovingly, generously and with integrity. We must love those who are most difficult to love: forgive those who have hurt us most and give to those who are in need.

O Lord, these are easy words to say but so hard to put into practice. So often I lack the courage of my conviction. I fear what others might say. I am often afraid to offer help to someone in need for fear of rejection. I sometimes do not know what to do and I end up doing nothing, missing another opportunity.

O Lord, give me the strength and the courage to do the right thing in your name and for your honour and glory.

*From Newman’s “Meditations and Devotions”



JOE'S PICTURE: PENTECOST

I looked at Joe's new picture, The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, hovering and looking down at the Earth which seemed to be starting to burn. As I searched for its meaning I was reminded of a book that I have recently been reading. "An Impossible God"* is a beautiful book written by my cousin Frank Topping in which he tells us why he thinks that God is impossible. He points out that while theologians try to define God, He is and must be indefinable. If mankind were able to understand and define him He would not be God. Frank then goes on to present a wonderful meditation on the passion of Christ in the form of Stations of the Cross seen from the point of view of ordinary people who witnessed or took part in the events that led to Jesus' death on the cross. He then gives us seven more stations "beyond the cross" about the events that happened between Easter and Pentecost. The characters who tell the story are ordinary people like the serving girl who drew the denial from Peter. There is Simon of Cyrene, Veronica and even one of the soldiers telling about the part they played,

God has been described in many ways, omnipotent, all-powerful, merciful and loving. His love is an impossible love far beyond our comprehension. At Christmas we celebrated His coming in the form of Jesus to unite his divinity to our humanity. He became one of us and one with us. He showed his love for us by suffering and dying for us. He did the impossible by rising from the dead. On the feast of The Ascension he completed that union by returning to his kingdom and uniting our humanity to his divinity. We now look forward to Pentecost and look forward to the coming of the third person of that one God. Indeed his love is impossible but I think of Him sometimes as a helpless God. He is of course omnipotent and to him all things are possible. He is merciful and loving and his love is unconditional but is that not his weakness? He can love me but He cannot make me love him. That is the free choice He gave to me. Only I can make the choice to love him or reject him. He created me to play a part, however insignificant, in his eternal plan but how often have I failed him when he asked for my help? How often have I made the excuse that I am only an ordinary man, what can I do?

Those early Christians must have felt that way, hiding from the authorities, in their room feeling lost and afraid, but here we are now, after two thousand years and the church has spread throughout the world. Perhaps it is not a weakness of God but a strength that he has given for us to discover deep within ourselves. We have only to trust him, accept his love and say yes to the Holy Spirit. Perhaps He will spark a fire within us that will inflame the hearts of members of our families, our parish, our country, the world. Instead of asking ourselves "what can I do?" perhaps we should turn to God and ask "what am I to do?"

O Holy Spirit, help me to search deep within myself for the gifts that you have given me and give me the courage to use them in your service. Help me to be grateful for my ordinariness and not use it as an excuse to ignore your call,

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle within them the fire of your love

* "An Impossible God" a classic meditation on the passion by Frank Topping



LORD, SHOW US THE WAY

This moment in Time is the most important of my life. Billions of years of creation have occurred to bring about this moment. All the millennia of human history have brought me to this moment. All that has happened to me in the past is now history. Whatever happens in the future will begin with this moment. How I live this moment will in some, perhaps imperceptible, way affect the future and those that I come in contact with. The moment I began this reflection has already passed. Whatever I am inspired to write to complete it is still to come. If it is never read by any other or if it is deleted and lost to the world after it is completed, it will still remain a part of who I am. I will have added something to my being.

There have been moments in the past, which seemed insignificant at the time but which have stayed with me through the years, like the time I first read the psalm.

*What is man that you keep him in mind?
Mortal man that you care for him?
Yet you have made him little less than a God.
With honour and glory you have crowned him.*

It made me realise how important I was to God and brought home to me how much He loved me. When I first read "The story of a soul" by St Therese of Liseaux I discovered that to do the ordinary things extraordinarily well was to offer it up to God in prayer. Time is one of the most precious gifts that God has given us. We can make the most of that gift by spending a little of it each day in his presence. I have come to realise in recent times that it is not necessary to "say" prayers in God's presence. The temptation is always to fill the time with words of praise or petition but words are what man has devised for man's own benefit. God does not need words. We can just sit quietly in his presence and listen and open our hearts to let him in. Thomas said to Jesus "-we do not know where you are going so how can we know the way?" Jesus replied "I am the way-no one can come to the father except through me." We can learn to put all our trust in Jesus by simply spending time in his presence. In a recent homily our priest said that now is the best time, here is the best place. If for a moment we can put aside all the hurts of the past and all the worries of the future and just be in the present moment, he will make us strong enough to face whatever lies in the future.

Time given to another is time spent with God. There are so many lonely people in this world and time spent with them will be abundantly rewarded. When two arms are wrapped around me and I hear the words "thank you for coming" my heart is filled with joy. A moment may be very brief but sometimes the memory of it can last a lifetime. Perhaps some of the time we spend with others may remain in their memories and may even change their lives in some small way. Perhaps it is arrogant of me to think like this for the cross I carry is much smaller and lighter than the crosses others have to bear. It is easy for me to live in the present but those who suffer great pain, hardship and depression may want to escape the now but are held captive in the present moment by their suffering. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to escape it. O Lord, help me to be sensitive to the suffering of others and to remember them always in my prayers. Show me ways to comfort them and ease their suffering.



ADORATION

As I sat in silent adoration of the Blessed Sacrament I thought of all the others in church with me who had come in answer to Pope Francis' plea. I thought of all the other parishes in the diocese and all the parishes throughout the world praying as we were, before the Blessed Sacrament. I thought of Pope Francis, this "man of the people", and I felt humble. It was not a false humility but a humility that comes with knowing that I am loved. My life has been much blessed. I have a family which I love very much and which shows its love for me. I live in a community that respects me and thinks well of me. I thanked God for my life but then I thought of those who have no-one to love or be loved by. No-one to smile at them or gently hold their hands: the orphaned, the bereaved, the abandoned, the sick, and the aged: So many lonely people.

O Lord, comfort them and console them and bless those who try to make their lives a little less lonely.

I began to feel uneasy for I realised how comfortable my life is. We have a house that is our refuge from what is sometimes a harsh world. We have food to eat and many of the luxuries of western living. We have a comfortable bed to sleep on each night. I thought then of those who have none of these things: Those who are homeless and jobless: those whose lives have been wrecked by their addictions to drink and drugs and sex.

O Lord, let me not be Judgemental towards these unfortunate people who have lost their way in this hedonistic and materialistic world. Let me be a "good Samaritan". Help me never to cross the road to the other side when I see someone in need. Let me never assume that someone else will take the responsibility to do what is needed. Let me be grateful for the things I have ,but not dependent on them. Make me realise that all I have is your gift to me.

I closed my eyes for a moment and I began to see flashing through my mind the television news clips of wide-eyed babies with distended stomachs who were slowly starving to death: pictures of orphaned children, hiding in caves, trying to escape the terror of the war raging around them: trying to survive. I saw pictures of people in a long, long procession along a dusty road, refugees trying to reach a place of safety. I saw pictures of cities that had been destroyed by the bombs. I saw bodies lying in a war-torn street.

O Lord, it is always the innocent that suffer the most. There is so much injustice in the world: so much greed: so much hatred: so much evil carried out in your name.

O Lord, how do these things happen? This is not your will. As we sit at home in our comfortable chairs, we do not feel that we are responsible for what is happening but we have done little to prevent it. In this wonderful age of communication and technology we cannot use the excuse that we didn't know what was happening. What can I do to help? I am no longer a young man. There is probably little I can physically do but I can pray. I can remember those that are suffering in my morning prayer and in my mass. I can remember them as I approach the altar to receive you in Holy Communion. I can offer my day up for them, all that I do and all that you allow to happen to me.

O Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.