

MORE REFLECTIONS OF A PARISHIONER



ST WINEFRIDE'S PARISH, NESTON

**TO CELEBRATE THE ANNIVERSARY
OF
MIKE'S ORDINATION**

*“What you leave
is not what is engraved in stone monuments,
but what is woven into the lives of others”*

Pericles

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A PRAYER FOR HAPPINESS

*I asked God for strength
That I may achieve...*

*I was made weak,
That I might learn to humbly obey.*

*I asked for health,
That I might do greater things...*

*I was given infirmity,
That I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches,
That I might be happy...*

*I was given poverty,
That I might be wise.*

*I asked for power,
That I might have the praise of men...*

*I was given weakness,
That I might feel the need of God.*

*I asked for all things,
That I might enjoy life...*

*I was given life
That I might enjoy all things.*

*I got nothing that I asked for,
But everything I had hoped for.*

*Almost despite myself,
My unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all men richly blessed.*

I don't know who wrote this prayer but I found it on a 1983 parish news sheet and liked it. I cut it out and kept it in my pocket to remind me how blessed I am.

THE ANNUNCIATION



I can remember how we felt when we learned that we were going to have our first grandchild. How excited we were, another baby in our family to love and cherish. It had been a long time since we had felt the joy of cuddling a baby of our own in our arms. This time we would be Nana and Granddad and would be allowed to spoil the little one because that is what grandparents do. How we looked forward to watching our grandchild grow. Would it be a girl or a boy? Whichever it was we would spend as much time as we could with her or him and treasure every moment.

Anne and Joachim must have felt the same joy, but there must also have been bewilderment. From the moment that she was born they knew that Mary was special. She was such a happy, contented baby, never any trouble. As a little girl she was popular with other children because she was so kind and considerate towards them, always more concerned about their welfare than her own. Now that she was grown up, she was such a wonderful daughter, so thoughtful and caring and helpful. She was such a joy to be with. She would make Joseph a wonderful wife and she would be a perfect mother.

But how could this happen? How could Mary be with child while she was still a virgin? Mary had told them that an angel had visited her and announced that she would conceive and bear a son, but how could that be possible? They were familiar with the scriptures and knew that to God everything was possible. They knew that Sarah, Abraham's wife had a child in her old age, long after her child-bearing days had passed, but this was different. Why had God put Mary in this position? Was it a punishment? Surely not for hadn't the angel addressed Mary as "favoured one". He had told her not to be afraid, that she had found favour with God. Why, then, did he not wait till Mary and Joseph were married? What will people think? What will Joseph think? They knew that Joseph was a good man and a God-fearing man but how would he react to this? Would he reject his bride-to-be?

Mary herself did not seem concerned. She was full of joy and anticipation. She was more worried about her cousin Elizabeth who the angel had said was also with-child. Mary had said to the angel "I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done unto me". She had accepted without hesitation. She had, as always, put her complete trust in God. But she was so young. Did she realise how much it would change her life?

It was hard being a parent. Anne and Joachim were afraid for their daughter but resolved that they would stand by her and support her come what may, even if it meant uprooting and leaving everything they owned behind and moving to start a new life in a place where they were not known. They would love her baby as much as they loved Mary herself.

O Lord, help us to be good parents. Help us to lovingly care for the children you give us and when they are grown to adulthood help us to respect them, to advise, guide and encourage but never to judge them. Help us instead to entrust them into your tender and loving care. O Lord we trust you.



*Joseph, wise ruler of God's earthly household,
Nearest of all men to the heart of Jesus,
Be still a father, lovingly providing
For us, his brethren.*

*Saint strong and manly, chosen by the Father,
As trusted guardian of the Son eternal,
Guide us as once you guided Wisdom's footsteps
With sure direction.*

Joseph, patron of the universal church, pray for us.

THE QUIET MAN

Heroes are often depicted as strong, silent characters whose actions speak for them: People who sometimes seem to the observer to be reluctant to act, but who in a crisis will selflessly and heroically act for the benefit of others. St Joseph is the epitome of such heroes. In the gospels he is described as an honourable man but no word of his has ever been quoted. When told that the woman he was betrothed to was with-child, he did not consider his own feelings but put the happiness and wellbeing of the woman he loved before his own feelings of sadness and loss. Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly in order to save her from the shame and humility that a public divorce would bring her. It would also allow her the freedom to marry the father of the child in her womb. The gospel then tells us that he had a dream in which an angel appeared to him and explained that the baby had been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. The angel told him to take Mary to his home as his wife. When Joseph awoke he did not question the dream nor react against it but simply obeyed the instructions he had been given.

When the time came to travel to Bethlehem, Joseph lovingly protected Mary on the journey and although there was no room at the inn, he did find some shelter, humble though it was. No angry display, no word of complaint came from his lips. He simply made the best of the situation and made Mary and her newborn baby as warm and comfortable as possible. He must have stood in awe when the angels sang to announce the baby's birth. I wonder what he thought when the shepherds came in from the countryside to see the baby and kneel before him in adoration. If he was surprised by the arrival of the shepherds, what must Joseph have felt when men of great wealth and wisdom arrived from afar and also knelt in adoration, offering gifts fit for a king? Yet Joseph stayed quietly in the background, on guard and carefully watching for any sign of danger.

Joseph's greatest act of heroism was after the visitors from the East had departed. He was advised in another dream to take his family to Egypt: To leave his homeland, his friends and relations, and his few possessions behind: To become refugees in a foreign land, where the people spoke a different language. How would he provide for his family in such an alien environment? Using his skill as a carpenter, Joseph must have found sufficient work in Egypt to build a home and provide for all their needs. When the angel informed him in another dream that Herod was dead, Joseph again uprooted and brought his family back to Israel, not to the home he knew before but to Galilee which again was an area he was not familiar with. He would have to start all over again. During all these trials, Joseph did not once complain but quietly submitted to the will of God.

Joseph must have been a devout and pious man for each year he travelled to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Passover. When Jesus was lost for three days, Joseph must have reproached himself for letting it happen. How anxious he must have been on that journey back to Jerusalem, yet it was not Joseph who questioned Jesus about his absence, it was Mary.

For all these sacrifices and for the hardships he endured, Joseph was abundantly rewarded. Oh what bliss it must have been to cradle the baby Jesus in his arms, rocking him gently and singing a lullaby! Oh what joy when Jesus took his first hesitant steps and uttered his first words! Oh what ecstasy when the child Jesus embraced him and whispered "I love you Daddy"! Apart from Mary, Joseph spent more time with Jesus than any other. What happiness he must have felt while playing with the boy and teaching him the skills of his trade as Jesus grew to manhood. He must have felt so proud as he introduced Jesus as "his son". Joseph's final reward was a happy death with Mary and Jesus beside him in the last moments of his life here on Earth.

**The title is borrowed from a 1952 film "The Quiet Man", directed by John Ford and starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara*



THE MARRIAGE FEAST AT CANA

I was only twelve years old when my mother became a widow. Of her eight children she still had five of us at home to look after and care for. I was the second oldest. It must have been very difficult for her but she had family and friends who would visit her often and spend time with her. One such friend was Mrs L. They would sit and drink tea and eat homemade scones, thick with butter. I would usually be doing my homework or watching television in the same room. I those days we were not allowed to spend hours on our own in our bedrooms. I would not have any interest in what my mother and Mrs L were talking about.

Inevitably, the time would come for Mrs L to go home. My mother would turn to me and say

“Anthony, Mrs L is going now”

A simple statement of fact but I knew that she was really asking me to put my coat on and escort her friend to the bus stop and see her safely on the bus. I would always feel irritated and try to find an excuse to get out of it.

“Aw Mum, I’m doing my Homework”.

My mother would say no more for she knew that I would do as she asked. I could never refuse anything she requested, no matter how much I might complain at the time.

When we attend a wedding reception, if the service is good, we are not aware of the servers but are more interested in the conversation going on around the table. The better the service the less the servers are noticed. So it was at Cana. The food was good, the service was great and the guests were enjoying themselves. Mary, however, noticed some anxiety among the servants. She quietly and discretely asked the head servant what was his concern. When he told her that the wine was running out she did not condemn him for incompetence but it was indeed a crisis. If they did run out of wine it would bring great shame on the groom and the servants would undoubtedly be punished for letting him down.

Mary’s solution was simple. She just turned to her son and whispered

“They have no wine”

Jesus seemed irritated by the statement.

“What am I to do about it? I’m not yet ready to show that I can perform miracles”

Mary smiled and turned back to the servant and said

“Do exactly whatever he tells you to do”.

Mary knew her son well. She knew he would not refuse anything she asked for. Jesus knew of his mother’s deep awareness of the needs of others and her great desire to lessen their suffering. And so it was that Jesus performed one of his first miracles at the request of his mother.

Whenever I think of the marriage feast at Cana, I think of my mother.

*O Mary, Our Mother,
help us through all our trials and tribulations and, in times of crisis, intercede for us.
We know that your son, Jesus, will not refuse anything you ask on our behalf
If it is for our own good.*



A COLD MORNING IN FEBRUARY

Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said "Of course I want to! Be cured!"

After Father had read the above passage from St. Luke's Gospel he advised, when reading a text, to (1) pick out the main points (2) ask what does it tell us about Jesus (3) what does it tell us about the society at the time and (4) what does it tell us about ourselves and the world we live in today. I followed his advice and as I reflected I was reminded of something that happened a few years ago.

It was a cold February morning as we travelled down the motorway to Bath. As we got out of the car in the Park and Ride park the icy wind cut through us and we pulled our thick coats around our bodies, tightened our scarves around our necks and pulled our hats down over our ears as we ran across the park to catch the bus that would take us into the city. We were excited and looking forward to the full English breakfast we were going to treat ourselves to. The bus dropped us in the city centre. It was still early and some of the shops were not yet open. I had no cash in my pocket for I had not had time to visit a cash point but I had my bits of plastic in my wallet so I would be alright.

As we made our way past the cathedral and up the main street I noticed a young woman standing in a doorway asking passers-by for money. Her clothes were not suitable for such a cold winter's day and she shivered as she hopped from one foot to the other hugging herself as she tried to get warm. I looked at her for a moment and felt sorry for her but as I had no money to give her I walked on by. We enjoyed a hearty breakfast in a warm comfortable eating establishment and when we came out on the street again, the sun was shining but it was still bitter cold.

We wandered around the city, visited the roman spa baths and of course the cathedral. It was an enjoyable day but I carried with me throughout a sense of unease. I could not forget that young woman who looked so cold and hungry and I felt angry. How could this be so in this 21st century in this first world country? I felt guilty and so helpless. I felt I should have done something but then what could I have done? And I thought what would Jesus have done? When the leper knelt before Jesus and begged for help, Jesus did not ignore him. Lepers were shunned by that society; cast out; considered to have committed some great sin. Yet Jesus touched him, touched the untouchable! He had the courage to defy the conventions of that judgemental society. When we came back to that same spot, the young woman was no longer there.

I have since prayed for that young woman and others like her. I have also prayed for a society which is so rich and yet ignores such poverty and brokenness. I have prayed for myself that God will forgive my weakness, my timidity and my lack of courage. I know that when that young woman stands before Jesus he will open his arms to her and welcome her into his kingdom, for he loved the poor, the sick, the broken, the outsider, the marginalised and the lonely. I pray that when I stand before Jesus he will not say to me "I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, cold and in need and you passed me by".

O Lord, forgive us our complacency and give us the will and the courage to change this selfish and self-centred society we live in.

*Faithfully he brings true justice;
He will neither waver nor be crushed
Until true justice is established on Earth. Isaiah 42*



RECONCILIATION

I was asked the question “do you have to go to confession before receiving Holy Communion?” If we have done something that offends God, for most of us, we do it to satisfy our own selfish desires rather than to offend God, but if it does offend God then it is sinful. Very often when we sin we not only offend God but we hurt somebody else. If we are aware that our actions have offended God and hurt another person or persons then we may be half way to being sorry. If we make a sincere act of contrition and are truly sorry, I believe we are immediately forgiven. It must be genuine sorrow for our sins and we must have a resolve to put right, to the best of our ability, the wrongs we have committed. If this is the case then we are in a state of grace and can confidently receive Holy Communion.

As for mortal sin, I find it hard to explain but I believe that for most of us it is difficult to commit a mortal sin. To do so we knowingly, wilfully and fully understanding the consequences of that action, commit a serious act in defiance of the will of God. In this case we need to formally confess our sin and receive absolution through the priest. But again we must be genuinely sorry. It is no use just going through the motions; the words of absolution will be meaningless if we are not truly sorry. If we have done something that has hurt another person and damaged our relationship with God, we may feel the need to talk to a priest and formally confess our sin.

I recently asked a lady who is in her 90's if she would like Fr. Ravi to hear her confession. She told me that at her age she no longer gets the opportunity to commit sin. However, we do not need to wait until we have done something wrong before participating in the sacrament of reconciliation. This sacrament, like all the others is a celebration and grace-giving. The grace we receive gives us the strength and encouragement to cope with the temptations that may beset us in the future.

When I participate in the sacrament of reconciliation I prepare myself beforehand, thinking about my life, what is good about it and what is not so good. I try to imagine that it is Jesus I am talking to rather than a priest. If it was Jesus sitting in front of me in the confessional, what would I say to him? I am not a bad man. I have not committed murder or beaten my wife. I have not stolen from the poor or taken advantage of the weak. I am not a bad man but I am far from perfect. I am not the man that he, Jesus, would want me to be. I am weak, timid and sinful. It is not just the things I do; there are so many things I fail to do. I have been blessed all my life but so often I fail to show gratitude. I fail to appreciate the many good things that God has put before me. I try to be good and I try to be kind and considerate towards others. When I perform an act of kindness to another, I feel pleased with myself until I realise that I am only able to perform that act because God has given me the means and the opportunity to do so. There are so many opportunities I have missed because I didn't want to get involved or because I was not prepared to step out of my comfort zone: the times I have not made a phone call to someone who I know to be alone and who would love to hear a friendly voice, because I didn't feel like talking; the times I have not visited someone I know to be sick or in hospital because I have not wanted to interrupt or spoil my evening.

I no longer attend the sacrament weekly as I was encouraged to do in my youth, I go to confession about four times a year, usually in Lent, Advent and a couple of times in between. I feel that if I go too often I may lose heart. Little progress is made in one or two weeks whereas if I look back over a longer period I can appreciate better what progress I have made. Reconciliation is often conceived in a negative way. People don't like to confess their weaknesses to another. They are reluctant to talk about their failings, they don't like going to confession. It needn't be like that. Think of the Prodigal Son. Once he had realised how badly he had treated his father and decided to throw himself on his father's mercy, the father ran out to meet him, hardly giving him a chance to say sorry and declared a celebration. God does not want us to wear sack cloth and ashes. He just wants us back. It is a good thing to get your children used to the sacrament. Take them regularly. When they first participate in the sacrament they are full of joy. Help them to keep that feeling. The longer you leave it after the first time the harder it becomes. Be positive yourself and help them to stay positive.



NO WORDS
Siger Koder

THE FIFTH STATION

The enigmatic picture that has hung in the sanctuary during lent is indeed hard to understand. The pillar of wood that stands erect in the middle of the picture, is that the foot of the cross that the saviour of the world will be nailed to? There are two figures holding the cross, who are they? Are they supporting the cross, holding it in place, or are they clinging to it to support themselves in their grief? The hand of the figure on the right covers the hand of the other. Is it offering consolation or is it the hand of one who is searching for answers? What makes it more puzzling is that we cannot see the faces of the two figures. They are hidden behind the cross. Is the figure in the red cloak Jesus? Could he be standing up again after stumbling and falling? Could the man in green have helped him to his feet and be standing with him, supporting him till he is ready to continue his long and painful journey to the top of the hill? Could it perhaps be Simon of Cyrene? His hand is covering Jesus' hand to comfort him. Perhaps his other arm is around Jesus' waist helping him to stand up again. I wonder if Simon realises who he is helping and how great will be his reward for his act of kindness.

As I stand gazing at the picture and puzzling at its meaning, another thought occurs to me. Perhaps the hand that is resting on Jesus' hand is my own, caressing it, reaching out to him for reassurance and forgiveness. Behind the cross perhaps my head is resting on Jesus' shoulder weeping, not just for the injustice that he is suffering, but for myself too, knowing that my sins have played a part in condemning him: knowing that I want to help him but knowing also that I am afraid and weak. Many times in the past I have been too timid to stand out from the crowd and demand justice. Many times have I lacked the courage to admit to being a follower of Jesus.

Yet my tears are bitter-sweet for I know that despite my sinfulness, Jesus loves me. I know also that despite the many sins I have committed, he has forgiven me. I know that if I accompany him now on his way to Calvary, he will always be with me, helping me to carry whatever cross I am asked to bear. And yet I am still afraid.

*Lord,
Pulled towards you
I am afraid.
I fear change in me.
I fear what you see
in the world and in myself.
I am afraid to follow you.
I fear being tied,
Inextricably,
To love that never turns.
My instincts
Are to turn and run.*

"An Impossible God" Frank Topping

O Lord, give me the courage and the strength to follow and to bear the cross with you.



THE RAISING OF LAZARUS
Duccio

THE DEATH OF LAZARUS

.When Martha heard that Jesus had come she went to meet him, Mary remained in the house.

Mary must have been very upset and angry with Jesus. They had sent him a message informing Jesus that Lazarus was ill and very close to death. Why did Jesus wait? Why did he not drop everything and come to save the friend he loved so much? He could have cured him but instead he allowed Lazarus to die. Why? Did he not care? Mary believed in Jesus, she trusted him. Was she not the one who had poured ointment on him and wiped his feet with her hair? Whenever he spoke, had she not hung on his every word? Why had he let her down now? Was he not the one he claimed to be? Had his words been false? Had he not loved her and her sister and brother as much as he said he did? Why did he not come sooner before it was too late? And yet he was here now. Had he just come to offer his condolences or could she dare to hope that he could still do something? Could he still give them back their beloved brother?

Martha also was confused but went out to meet Jesus.

“If you had been here, my brother would not have died”. Was she too blaming Jesus for her brother’s death? And yet she was prepared to give him another chance.

“I know that, even now, whatever you ask of God, he will grant you”

After Jesus questions her about her faith, she finally declares her belief that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God. Martha then goes back to Mary and asks her to come and see Jesus. As soon as Mary sees Jesus, she falls at his feet.

“Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died”, she said.

Seeing the distress of the sisters, Jesus was overcome with emotion.

Lord, how often do I blame you when things have gone wrong? When bad things happen, how often do I ask why you let it happen? How often have I thought that you have ignored my prayers? How often, when I have no other answer do I say that it is God’s will? But Lord, you know it is not a reproach, rather, it is an act of faith. Faith that you have all the answers and that for you all things are possible. It is because I don’t understand and, like Mary, my grief clouds my vision. I know, Lord, that you are goodness and love. How could anything evil be your will?

O Lord, I know that, as our father, you feel every hurt that we experience. When we shed tears, you too are overcome with compassion. O Lord, I trust you. Help me when in my weakness I have doubt.

*Lord, forgive us,
The doubters in the shadows.
Forgive us our prevarications,
Our cynical speculation.
When you offer eternal life
Let us not condemn ourselves
In the pride of shallow wisdom.
Lord, we believe,
Help our unbelief.*

Frank Topping

*Why are you cast down, my soul,
Why groan within me?
Hope in God; I will Praise him still,
My saviour and my God.*

PSALM 41



NAMASTÉ

“The life and death of each of us has its influence on others” St. Paul

Some years ago, a very dear friend told me how when he was asked, if he needed money, did he have a friend that would give him £100, his reply was “I don’t know but I do know that I have a 100 friends that would each give me £1.” That had a profound effect on me. I have since made a conscious effort to develop a special relationship with each person I meet. Not one where we meet regularly to have a drink together or to play golf and certainly not so that I can ask for money, but one that whenever we meet we are pleased to see one another. Of course my friend is more charismatic than I am and attracts people easily. However people come to know me more gradually. I do not force myself on anyone but I try to show interest in them with a smile, with eye contact and by listening to what they have to say.

I know and have known people with whom I feel and have felt a special relationship, a connection, a mutual respect and esteem. I feel that no words are ever needed to express or confirm that feeling as I sense that it is mutual. In my arrogance I took some credit for having developed that friendship between us but I have come to realise that it was not my doing. I have recently learned a new word “Namasté”. It is a greeting, a salutation that is widely used in India and Eastern countries. It literally means “the divinity in me honours the divinity in you”. Every human being is created by God. We are created in God’s image. We have a physical nature and a spiritual nature. It is the spiritual nature that is Godlike. All too often we try to satisfy the physical and neglect the spiritual. Each human being has a core of goodness—Godliness - but like Adam we begin to think that we don’t need God’s help. I think that sometimes when two people meet there is a recognition deep within. The goodness that is at the core of each one recognises the goodness in the other. There is a connection. When we marvel at a magnificent scene, or view a beautiful sunset or see a rainbow and experience a feeling of awe, the goodness deep within recognises the goodness of God’s creation. It is our spiritual nature, our Godliness that is reaching out, through the other person or the awe-inspiring experience, to God. When we see another soul in need and feel sympathy for them, I think it is God reaching through that soul to us, but too often we fail to respond.

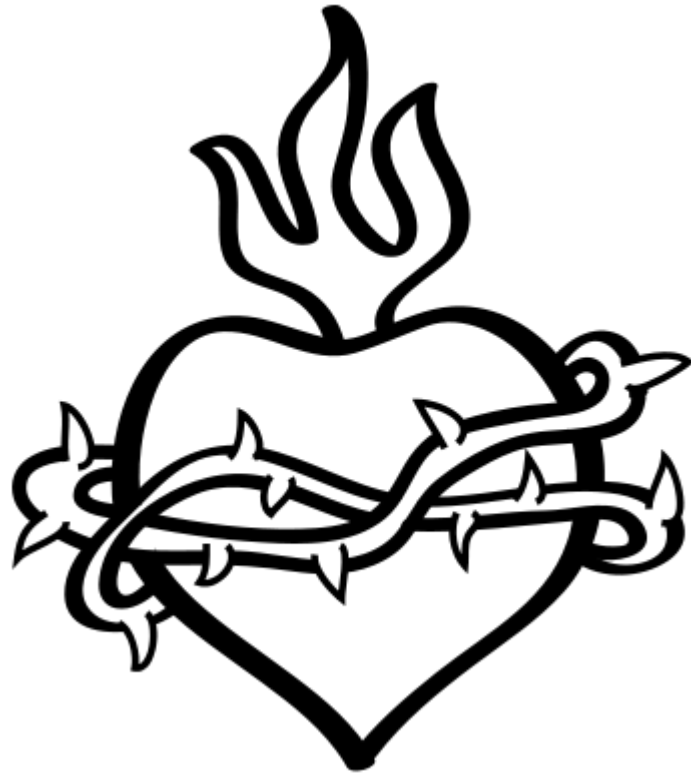
Sometimes when I meet someone new, I do not feel that connection immediately. It is only as we get to know each other that we begin to connect. Perhaps that is how we are with God. It is not until we get to know Him that we begin to feel his presence and we can only get to know him by spending time with him and listening to him. We can tell him all about ourselves and our problems, although he already knows them, but then we have to listen to him. We may not hear his answer immediately and we have to be patient. Often he speaks to us through others and in small ways, in something that happens, in some thing we hear or something we read but if we are truly sincere and receptive to him we can come to understand what he is telling us.

I have been a very slow learner. In fact it has taken me a lifetime to only begin to know God but I trust that he will be patient with me and continue to teach me.

O Lord, teach me to see Jesus in everyone I meet and may they see in me the vision of your beloved son.

*“Christ be in all hearts thinking about me,
Christ be in all tongues telling of me.
Christ be the vision in eyes that see me.
In ears that hear me, Christ ever be”.*

(adapted from St Patrick’s breastplate)



LOVE

I was a teenager in the 1950's. People of my age had lived through a terrible war and were still suffering the aftermath of that war, the trauma, the rationing, and the hardships. The A-bomb and the H-bomb were hanging over us like swords of Damocles. There was a resolve that this could never be allowed to happen again for surely the next war would bring an end to the world. We would make love not war! So began the age of free love. Unfortunately we misinterpreted the word love. We thought of it as physical rather than spiritual.

Human love is learned. We usually begin to learn from birth and possibly are still learning in the last moments of our lives. We cannot learn to love if we are not shown love. For those of us who grow up in a loving environment it is perhaps easier. St Paul tells us that without love we are nothing. God's love is perfect, unconditional and eternal. Our love is imperfect.

I believe that to really love truly and purely we must first have humility. Humility is not to put ourselves down or to declare ourselves worthless, but to accept that we were created by God and as such we have worth. We are loveable and deserve to be loved. It is to accept that everything we are and every thing we have has been given to us by God. There is nothing we can do without God. Our God-given bodies cannot function without the air that God has given us to breath. Everything that exists has been created by God and is therefore to be loved. When we perform an act of charity, we can only do so because God has given us the opportunity and the means to do so.

It was the lack of humility, pride, that brought about mans downfall. It is arrogance that leads one man to think that because he is stronger than the next man he deserves more than him and he uses his strength to take what he wants. It is national pride that causes one nation to feel superior to another and makes it suppress and abuse the other race. To be humble we must put the other man's needs before our own and use our talents for the common good.

Jesus pleaded with us to love one another as he loved us. We must constantly strive to become more like him. When he cured the sick and the disabled he did not accept thanks or praise but instructed them to go home, tell no-one and give praise and thanksgiving to God. We too must seek no praise or recognition for anything we do but redirect all the praise to God, our father. This is difficult for, as we receive more grace and become more Christ-like, others hold us in higher esteem. Jesus told us we are the salt of the earth, the light of the world but we must constantly remind ourselves that it is his light shining through us.

Before we can love our neighbour, we must love God. We cannot love God if we do not know him. We cannot know him if we do not search for him. Our love can only be unconditional if we surrender our will completely and utterly to his. Perhaps few will attain this level of holiness in this life. Perhaps our love will only be complete and unconditional when we stand before him and see the face of God.

*Make no mistake....it is all that is good, everything that is perfect,
which is given us from above:*

It comes down from the Father of all light.

Letter of St James 1:12.



FIRST HOLY COMMUNION

Last week was a very special day for the parish. It was the First Holy Communion day for our children. It was a lovely day. The sun shone, the girls looked beautiful in their dresses and the boys looked handsome in their white shirts and red sashes. Joe painted a new picture especially for the day. The mass was very uplifting with the children participating in the readings and the prayers. How confident they all were. I tried to remember my own First Holy Communion but unfortunately I have no recollection of the day but Joe's picture reminded me of how I felt at the time. I had a great feeling of wonderment and awe. I had no doubt that in this small wafer of bread was the body and blood of Jesus. I vividly remember how surprised I felt that everybody seemed to take it for granted and I wondered why they were not prostrating themselves before the altar. That feeling of reverence and awe has remained with me throughout my life.

In those days, Holy Communion and confession seemed to be almost the same sacrament. We were led to believe that we could not receive the Blessed Sacrament without attending confession beforehand. So it became a tradition that, Saturday evening, we would confess our sins and after fasting from midnight we would receive Holy Communion on Sunday morning. I am happy that these days the Sacrament of First Forgiveness is celebrated separately weeks before First Communion. It is a beautiful sacrament in its own right; a grace-giving sacrament, but unfortunately one which people seem reluctant to use. They are uncomfortable about sitting in front of a priest confessing their sins.

If I make the decision to use the sacrament, it is because I am aware of my sinfulness and feel some remorse. I think of the prodigal son. As soon as he returned to his father he was forgiven. The father rushed out to meet him, hardly giving him the chance to confess. God knows all that we do and knows when we are sorry. He doesn't want to punish us but to celebrate our return nor does he hold our sins against us. I have been asked what sin have I committed that I need to confess to a priest. It is not necessary to wait till a sin has been committed to receive the sacrament of reconciliation; I celebrate the sacrament because it gives me a chance to think about my life, what is good about it and what is not so good. I can chat to the priest and receive counselling and advice. I try to imagine that it is Jesus sitting there in front of me. What would I say to him? The sacrament reconciles me to my God and puts behind me all the occasions when I have offended him. It gives me the grace to try to improve my life and serve Him better. It is a most wonderful sacrament.

Holy Communion is food for our souls. Each time we receive the body and blood of Jesus we are renewed and made a little stronger. Frequent communion helps us to face life's difficulties. I am sure the children and their families will continue to take advantage of the many blessings they have received in meeting Jesus for the first time in both sacraments.

*O Jesus, You said that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven we must become like these little ones,
help us to follow their example and, through the sacraments,
learn to put all our trust in you.*



CHRIST THE KING

*Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ,
for he promised to be with his church until the end of time*

It seems to me to be a contradiction, the cross and the glorified Christ, and yet they are inseparable. The glorious resurrection would not have happened if the shameful crucifixion had not precluded it. So too does the title “Christ the King” seem, at first, to be a contradiction. He is a king without wealth. He has no possessions. He owns no land and has no fine castle to live in. His clothes are those of a poor man. He wears no jewels to adorn his body. The only adornments to his body are the holes in his hands and his feet made by the nails that pinned him to the cross and the wound in his side that was torn open by the soldiers lance. No bejewelled crown has been placed on his head, instead a cruel circle of piercing thorns.

Other kings demand obedience and total loyalty. Jesus simply opens his arms to us and invites us to follow him. Other kings burden their subjects with tithes and taxes and hardships. Jesus opens his arms and invites us to lay all our burdens on his shoulders. Other kings demand that their subjects be prepared to fight and die for them. Jesus opened his arms and died for us. Jesus does not lord it over his subjects but humbly kneels and washes their feet.

Where is his army to protect him from his abusers? Who will avenge the terrible injustice that has been done to him? At his birth, a host of angels surrounded him to watch over him and protect him and they sang his praise. At his death, the same host surrounded him but could not intervene to prevent his death. Only Christ could conquer death. And the angels wept!

Jesus looked down from the cross and did not condemn his abusers but asked his father to forgive them and he offered them salvation. Now Jesus is glorified. He has entered his kingdom. But it is not an earthly kingdom, it is a universal kingdom: a kingdom of love and mercy. Jesus still has his arms outstretched, inviting us and yearning for us to turn to him. He is still promising, still assuring us that there is a place for us in his eternal kingdom.

*In my Father's house are many mansions
And I go to prepare a place for you
So that where I am, you may be also;
If it were not so I would have told you.*

O Jesus, help me to surrender to your loving embrace.

* Inspired by Joe's Picture “Christ the King”



A MOMENT OF DISBELIEF

And he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. I looked at it and thought, what can this be? And I was given this general answer: it is everything which is made. I was amazed that it could last because it looked so small and fragile.

And I was answered in my understanding. It lasts and always will, because God loves it and everything has being through the love of God. In this little thing I saw three things: God made it, God loves it and God cares for it,

JULIAN OF NORWICH

I sat quietly in my garden thinking of God and the universe. I thought of the vastness of the universe, too much for my feeble mind to understand. I thought of God who created the universe and I thought how can there be a being so great that he can create and control it and everything in it? I had, I think, a moment of disbelief which turned into a feeling of wonder and awe. I asked myself why should such a god care for a nothingness such as me, yet he has counted every hair on my head.

As I marvelled at these things, I looked down at my feet and there, running across the paving stone, was a tiny red mite. I thought, what if that tiny creature could think and rationalise like me, what would he think of me? He would think me a God too great to comprehend. He might wonder what is beyond this world of his, this small area of my garden. He would find it hard to contemplate the vastness of my small garden and Earth would be beyond his imagination. And yet, I thought, there are creatures much smaller than this tiny mite that if they too could rationalise might consider the mite a God.

I began to realise that it is not a matter of size. Even if I could travel to the ends of the universe, I still might not find God. Perhaps the only way I can find and know God is by searching within. At the very core of my being is where God is. I know that he is there for there have been times when I have felt his presence. No matter how far we explore the universe, we will only find evidence of God, we will not find proof. The only real knowledge of God is deep within us but how difficult it is to find. Initially we may seek help to prepare for it but ultimately it is a single-handed voyage. We must turn our backs on all our worldliness, surrender all our self-centredness and put all our trust in Him.

*O Lord, I know that you have been with me all my life, watching over me and guiding me
but I feel that only now am I taking my first tentative steps to really knowing
You. I am afraid. Afraid that I might lose my way: that the journey may be too hard:
that I may be too weak: that I may lack the courage to complete the journey.*

O Lord, guide my footsteps.

When the way is hard, give me the strength and the courage to continue.

If I stumble and fall, pick me up.

If I am too tired to go on, carry me in your arms.

*O Lord, teach me to listen: to be tolerant and understanding rather than demanding:
to be persuasive rather than confrontational.*

*O Lord “-make me preach you without preaching-not by words,
but by my example and by the catching force, the sympathetic influence,
of what I do-by my visible resemblance to Your saints,
and the evident fullness of the love which my heart bears to You.”*

Meditations & Devotions by Blessed John Henry Newman



MY PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM

Looking back over my life is like looking at an album of photographs starting with the old black and white photos of my childhood and youth.

In my youth everything seemed so clear. We didn't need to be told what was right and what was wrong. We already knew. We had already worked it out for ourselves. If the older generation tried to tell us different we knew that they were living in the past. Things had changed since their day. We were now the new enlightened generation. We would not struggle as they had. We would not put up with what our parents had put up with. We would make love not war. With the arrogance of youth we knew we were right. It was so obvious, black was black, white was white. Why couldn't they see? We were living in a new world. This was our time. Their values were old and out of date and no longer relevant. We were living in a new, modern age. We had a right to our views and to live by our own standards.

As I get further into the album, the photographs have now changed. Colour has been introduced and the images a bit sharper.

In our middle years we begin to re-evaluate our lives and re-assess our ambitions. Up until now, we had put all our energies into building a career and a home: to start a family and to pass on to our children the values we held dear: to teach them how to be good, responsible and compassionate citizens. It hadn't been easy. No-one had told us how to be good parents; we had to find out by trial and error. Things hadn't been as black and white as they had seemed. But now our children had grown. They seemed so much more mature than we had been at that age. They seemed to know more than we did. The trouble was that they thought they knew everything. There was no telling them but it was so hard to stand back and let them make their own decisions: to learn from their own mistakes. Why could they not understand that we were once young? We had made the same mistakes that they were now making. We were the ones with the experience. We knew better. We had our principles. These were the rules by which we lived. We could not compromise our beliefs. We had compromised too much in the past. We could not give in. While our children were in our house, they would have to live by our standards.

In the latter pages of my album the photographs are so different. Now the images are so sharp and the colours so vivid. I no longer have to take a roll of film to a specialist to have them developed. With the help of my computer and my printer I can produce my own pictures. I can even alter them. I can crop the photo to highlight the main subject and I can airbrush away anything in the background that I think spoils the picture.

Looking back, I can see how far I have come. I have lost the arrogance of my youth and I know that I do not have all the answers. I have also lost the rigidity of my middle years and know that there are often many answers to a particular Question. We must try to listen to the other's point of view and try not to judge. Pope Francis himself said recently "-who am I to Judge?" We can advise and try to influence but never judge. Only God can Judge.

In my youth I believed things that I do not believe now. We were taught that the Catholic Church was the one true church and those who were not baptised could not enter the Kingdom of God. I still believe in the Holy Catholic Church but I know that there are many very good people that follow other faiths. I know that there are many caring people who follow no faith but have dedicated their lives to the service of others. I do not believe that they will be denied Heaven. I believe that we have a duty to pass on our faith to others but I do not believe that we should force it on them. We can bring our children up to respect our values but we must allow them to form their own opinions. We can influence them more effectively by our example.

I believe that from the moment of conception God is deep within us. I believe that throughout our lives He remains with us, teaching us, guiding us. Sometimes we ignore him because we are afraid of what he expects of us. Sometimes we refuse to listen because we disagree with him and we try to change things. We try to interpret the Word of God to suit our own ends. Sometimes we withdraw deep within ourselves to find God and listen to Him. Usually it is in times of crisis or distress and usually it is there that we find the answers.



VIRTUAL LIVING

What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare? W.H.Davies

I have a birthday coming up soon and, as usual, members of my family ask me what I want for my birthday. I always tell them the same thing. "All I want is a hug and a kiss" I say. They get annoyed with me because they think I'm being awkward but I'm not really. At my age, there is little that they can buy me, neither expensive nor inexpensive, that I really need. . It does not mean that I don't love and appreciate anything they give me. I treasure their gifts. My little office is full of mementoes that have been given to me over the years. I have shirts and sweaters in my wardrobe that I will continue to wear until they drop off me. Of course I would like my youth back or at least I would like to be able to do some of the things I could do then but to do it using the little wisdom that comes with age. However, I believe that the most precious gift anyone can give to another is the gift of one's time. Unfortunately, that is the one thing that most of us nowadays seem to have so little to give.

We live our lives at such a pace we seem no longer to have the time to "stand and stare". We live in an electronic age which allows us to communicate from one side of the world to the other almost instantaneously. We no longer speak to one another, we text or e-mail. We keep in touch with our family and friends via Facebook or Twitter. We even send greetings cards electronically. We shop on line, bank on line and do business on line. I am not opposed to modern technology, I think it is wonderful, amazing and potentially a means for good, but I fear we may be slipping into a virtual existence. There are so many, mainly the elderly, who have no access to the internet and are being excluded and marginalised. I fear we are losing basic skills such as mental arithmetic and spelling but, more worrying, the ability to really connect with one another. The more time we spend on line, the less we spend with each other. We cannot e-mail a smile. We cannot hold another's hand on Facebook. We cannot tweet a hug. On line, we cannot look into another's eyes and see the happiness or the sorrow deep within; the gladness or the fear. We cannot sense another's joy or sadness. We cannot console with a touch of the hand. We cannot simply be with a loved one.

People now seem afraid of silence. They walk or jog along the road wearing earphones unaware of the real world around them. They sit on trains and busses with their eyes glued to an appliance in front of them and their ears plugged to keep out the real world so that they can absorb the fantasy that is being created by their devices.

*O Lord, help us to stop and look and see the beautiful world that you have created.
Teach us to be still and listen to your voice in the natural sounds of this wonderful world.
The whisper of the breeze, the rustle of the leaves, the music of the rippling stream,
The chorus of the birdsong.
Give me the courage to smile at the stranger and not be unfriendly or aloof.
Help me to trust, and if I am abused,
Teach me to be glad that I am the abused and grant that I may love the abuser.
Let me be ever aware, not that the rose is surrounded by thorns,
But that the thorn bush is clothed in roses.
Let me always see the positive not the negative
O Lord, let me always recognise the good in others
And may they see you in me.*



FATHER CHRISTMAS AT ST WIN'S

Phone rings, Fr. Ravi answers

Fr. Ravi: Hello, who is calling?

Fr. Christmas: Hello Fr. Ravi, this is Fr Christmas.

Fr Ravi: Fr Christmas, is it really you? How did you get my number?

Fr Christmas: Yes, it's me. I got your number from your excellent web site. You didn't expect a call from me did you? I'm just ringing round all the nice places I visited last night to see how you are all enjoying Christmas.

Fr Ravi: Oh Fr Christmas, we are having a very joyful Christmas.

Fr Christmas: Oh good. We've had a very busy night, me and the elves and the reindeers, and we're now putting our feet up and having a nice cup of tea. Do you have any children with you?

Fr Ravi: Yes, we have a full church. There are Mums and Dads and quite a lot of children and even some Grandparents.

Fr Christmas: Oh good, my elves have asked me to solve a few riddles and I'm not sure of the answers. I'm getting a bit old you know. Perhaps the good people of St Winefride's may be able to help me.

Fr Ravi: We'll certainly help you if we can.

Fr Christmas: Well the first one is: -

What does a rhinoceros hang on the Christmas tree?

Fr Ravi: We don't know Fr Christmas. What does a rhinoceros hang on the Christmas tree?

Fr Christmas: His HORNAMENT

Here's another.

Why will the teachers at St Winefrides School all have to wear sunglasses next year.

Fr Ravi: Tell us Fr Christmas, why will they have to wear sunglasses?

Fr Christmas: Because the pupils at St. Winefride's are all so bright.

One more. Who delivers presents to baby sharks?

Fr Ravi: I don't know, who delivers presents to baby sharks?

Fr Christmas: Santa JAWS of course That was fun. The elves didn't think I would know the answers. But it was lovely visiting you all last night and seeing you all sleeping so peacefully. I do hope nobody was peeping. Neston is such a lovely place and as I went from house to house, singing to the reindeers, because I love singing, singing is like praying and it makes me happy, I kept thinking "I wonder what their favourite Christmas song is." What is your favourite Christmas song Fr Ravi?

Fr Ravi: Oh, I like quite a few. I like "Silent Night", "O Come, all you Faithful" and of course "Away in a Manger".

Fr Christmas: They're all lovely songs but do you know what my favourite is?

Fr Ravi: No Fr Christmas, please tell us

Fr Christmas: I have a very special friend whose name is Rudolph, so you can guess what the song is? It's "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer".

Fr Ravi: Oh, we all like that one

Fr Christmas: Well, I wonder if they would sing it with me for Rudolph.

Fr Ravi: Of course we will.

Fr Christmas: Good, I'll start it off and you join in. *Song*

That was wonderful. Rudolph's nose is glowing brighter than ever. He's so happy. I love to see him happy because he used to be very unhappy. Because he was different to all the other reindeers he was not allowed to play with them. He was an outsider. He didn't fit in. But Rudolph had a very special talent and one year he was able to put it to good use for the benefit of all of us. Now he's a hero and loved by all. To me that's what Christmas is all about. Don't you agree, Fr Ravi?

Fr Ravi: Yes of course

Fr Christmas: Well, I have to go now. I have to ring some of the other lovely places I visited, but do you know what St Winefride's? You're my favourite. Bye bye Fr Ravi, Bye bye everyone.