

GOD...  
*for a*  
*Monday Morning*

PERSONAL DEVOTIONS  
FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

BILL HOCKIN

ISBN: 978-0-9783522-0-2

© 1987 by Bill Hockin

Second Printing 2007

Taylor Printing Group Inc.  
225 A Alison Boulevard  
Fredericton, New Brunswick  
Canada E3C 2S5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission of the copyright owner.

Scripture taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Printed in Canada

# CONTENTS

## ADVENT

1. A Spring In The Desert ..... 7
2. When God Is Silent ..... 11
3. Who Needs Christmas? ..... 16

## CHRISTMAS

4. God Has Visited The Earth..... 21

## NEW YEAR'S DAY

5. A Hittite Is Only A Hittite ..... 25

## FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

6. It's A Lie!..... 30

## LENT

7. Harry's Flaw ..... 35
8. Guilty Or Not Guilty? ..... 40

## HOLY WEEK

9. Super Possibilities ..... 44
10. The Right Side Of The Cross..... 49

## GOOD FRIDAY

11. The Picket Line ..... 54

EASTER

12. It's Your Move ..... 59

AFTER EASTER

13. It's Hard To Believe..... 64  
14. How Are You Fixed For Friends? ..... 69

ASCENSION

15. The Little Church That Grew ..... 74

PENTECOST

16. The Power Within..... 79

AFTER PENTECOST

17. A God For Monday Morning ..... 83  
18. The Narrow Door ..... 88  
19. The Right Crowd ..... 93  
20. In Him I Win..... 98  
21. Pass The Plate.....103  
22. When Every Thing Is Not Enough.....108

THANKSGIVING

23. Why Me? .....113

# Introduction

This series of pastoral reflections, based on the Common Lectionary, are addressed to those who are searching for an authentic, relevant faith in the midst of the confusion and hurt of modern life. They attempt to bring the encouragement of God's Word to the human situation.

This book was first published in 1987 and is reprinted in this volume in 2007 with some editing to reflect cultural changes in the intervening time. The message and closing prayers remain the same.

It is my hope that the reader will be touched by these reflections in a way that will bring hope and possibility to the many changing seasons of their lives.

Bill Hockin



## *Advent*

# A SPRING IN THE DESERT

Isaiah 35:4

*Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.”*

Some time ago, I was standing in line waiting for my turn with the bank teller – a favorite and frequent position we take up before Christmas! Two women in front of me were talking about finding the Christmas spirit. One talked about being with her family. The other looked forward to a party. Just then, a couple of tellers became free so the conversation ended. As a parting statement, one said to the other, “I’ll be glad when it’s all over.”

All of us look to this time of year for some good news. We seem to expect just that little bit more from our parties, our get-togethers; expect more from our families and more from our churches. Some of us do manage to find good feelings, but others do not. For a lot of us, good news is hard to come by. We criticize the media because all they ever give us is bad news. We make jokes about good news. The other day, I heard the story of a doctor who comes and tells his patient after surgery, “Well, I’ve got some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that we amputated the wrong leg. The good news is that the other leg is better than we thought and you’ll be able to get around on it all right.” Well, what’s funny about that story is that it’s *all* bad news! And perhaps that’s what our society believes deep down inside – life is all bad news.

All this brings me to the 35th chapter of Isaiah – very much a good news statement, but one which is firmly wrapped

in reality. The reality of the human desert. For Isaiah, there were three great realities in his life. First on the list was the stark reality of human emptiness. He experienced it. The second was the reality of God. He experienced that too. And thirdly, was the reality of miracles. We have a mental picture of this ancient prophet, standing there in the desert completely alone. Barely surviving in his remote isolation, without hope of anything happening to change his life. He talks about “feeble hands” that can’t hold up anymore; of the “fearful voice” that wonders how to get through another day. Reflecting on the human condition, Isaiah perceives that there is something of the desert in all of us.

When I’m not lining up in the bank, I often find myself standing in line at the supermarket! One can’t help looking at the magazine covers and the faces on them – all perfect, all young, all smiling, all successful. And then one’s eyes move to the real faces around. The faces of reality. Here, there are few smiles and not much conversation. One senses that in emotional and social terms, the arid isolation of the desert is still very much a human reality. We may do our best to cover it up, to hide it, to deny it. We like to appear strong and successful... “up” all the time. It’s interesting that the most popular television dramas are those which portray their characters as they really are, not just as they are seen to be. Those which show that underneath all the bravado and the sophistication that is shown to the world, lurks the feeble and the weak and the fearful. As Isaiah says, our desert is real.

But then, something happens. Standing there alone in the wilderness, the prophet senses the presence of someone else. Someone is entering the desert and changing everything, offering a new focus on reality. Sure, the desert is still as real as ever – people are still people, no more. But suddenly Isaiah sees who has entered his barren terrain. With joy, he cries out, “Say to those with fearful hearts, be strong, do not fear.” For God is God, no less. And God is come.

It is often asked what the difference is between someone who is a Christian and someone who is not. The answer in part has to be that the Christian man or woman knows that in spite of our feebleness, our weakness and our fears, there is more than just desert in our lives. There is something else. There is Someone else. And because of that reality, we can find the strength to face our fears and endure our hardships. Because we believe our God has come. For God is in the desert too. Over and over again in our pastoral ministry we see it – that in times of weakness, of fear, of crisis, in times when we feel we stand alone and nothing will ever change, it is then that God makes himself real and comes to us with healing and with peace. God enters our world. Enters the desert of our lives, and changes everything.

As Isaiah stood there in the desert, desperately aware of his weakness, of his fearfulness, he suddenly sees God coming. And because of God he also sees renewal and healing and change. Change which has no logical explanation. He writes about blossoms in the desert, about bubbling streams and fresh springs, of blind people seeing and lame people walking. Things which had never happened before in the desert. And Isaiah, glancing around him with joy, knows the reality of miracles.

Many of us live or work in situations that we might describe as deserts. We might live in a marriage or home where life is dry and arid and pointless, where no one cares. Where there seems to be no future. And day after day we're haunted by the thought, "Is this all there is?" What we hear from Isaiah is that there is hope after all. Things can change. When we, by faith, recognize that Jesus stands in the center of everything, change will happen. "Gladness and joy will overtake us. Sorrow and sighing will flee away."

Many years ago, a friend of mine was visiting a classroom of children who had severe learning disabilities. The teacher had found that the children were best able to express their feelings through art. On this occasion, as it was mid-

December, he had asked them to draw Christmas. Simply that. “Draw Christmas.” Most of the children were working away at Santas and stars and Christmas trees, but then my friend noticed one small boy who was covering his paper with a whole series of chaotic, unrelated lines. Anger and pain were written all over the child’s small face. Hesitant to get involved in what might turn out to be an explosive situation, my friend centred on the Santas and the stars until he could control himself no longer. Bending over the boy’s work, what he found was totally unexpected. On the large, white sheet of paper the angry lines went back and forth, up and down...violent, jagged, uncompromising slashes of black and grey. But there in the center, glowed a small and perfect circle in yellow and green and red. Written at the bottom of all this were the carefully written words “Merry Christmas”.

The miracle of Christmas for that small child was not that the chaos and the confusion disappears. Still there is the pain and the fear and the anguish of the human condition. The miracle of Christmas for the child – and for every one of us, too – is that here, in the midst of our confusion and anger, in the midst of our weakness and our fears, here in our spiritual wilderness a light is come. No longer do we stand alone, for God has entered the desert.

*I know the desert, Lord. I know its dryness, its greyness – its emptiness. But I know you, Lord, and I have met you in my desert. In prayer and communion you have brought new friends to know and new songs to sing and food for my hunger.*

*In Christ, Amen.*

## WHEN GOD IS SILENT

Isaiah 63:15

*Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your compassion? They are withheld from me.*

Isaiah 64:1

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence –*

Sometime last year, I found myself sitting in the waiting room of a hospital emergency ward late at night. Certainly not a relaxed place at the best of times. Eventually, a man sitting next to me asked if I would pass him a magazine, and we got into conversation about why we were both there. He told me about his son who had been injured in a hockey accident, a head injury. He also told me how his wife had walked out on him the month before, about how he was fighting alcoholism and was worried about his job. “I’ve come to the end of my rope,” he said. “Why can’t somebody do something to change all this?” Then he turned and looked at me and, with despair in his voice, asked, “Where is God in all of this?”

As we read today’s lesson from Isaiah, we catch the same tone, the same sense of crisis and desperation. For here is a man whose country has been torn apart. The city of Jerusalem left desolate. The people of Israel scattered and discouraged. They had fought a war and they had been defeated. And now, the

Assyrian army is occupying their land. Fear and hopelessness reign supreme and, in the face of it all, Isaiah asks a question – the very same question that was voiced by that man in the hospital waiting room. “Why, oh Lord?” he says. “Where is your zeal and your might, your tenderness and your compassion and why are they withheld from us?” His anguished cry goes on, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.”

You see, Isaiah was a man caught in a “Catch 22” position. Where there seemed absolutely no way out of the mess. And how easy it is for us to relate to his feelings of despair and helplessness. For we all have experienced times when our problems have just seemed too much to bear. When we have done everything we know how, and exhausted every possibility in our attempt to find a solution. Perhaps we have had a problem in our family, perhaps in our marriage, perhaps in our job, or our health, or in trying to cope with the misery of being all alone. And we may have found that, despite all our efforts, all we face is a solid, brick wall. We perceive ourselves to be trapped. We are cornered and afraid. In words more fitted to the Twenty-First Century, we too say, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.”

Abraham Lincoln once wrote, “I have often been driven to my knees in prayer because I had nowhere else to go.” Somehow, in spite of Isaiah’s desperation, his words convey a solid note of certainty. For here is not a man who simply folds up his tent and says, “That’s it!” A man who takes four quarts of his favorite solace, heads for the hills and waits for the inevitable end. No, Isaiah does none of these things. Instead, he prays. In spite of God’s silence. In spite of the lack of any outward evidence that God is at work in his life, Isaiah is “driven to his knees”, acknowledging that God is God. Certainly, he says “I don’t know why these things are happening.” But always he acknowledges that God is still God.

The same faith has been seen over and over again in human history. In our own time, there is the story of

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a prisoner of conscience in a Soviet prison, declaring that, in spite of all the horror and the pain he had experienced, his means of survival was his faith – a faith that God was God, and that because of him, there was meaning and hope and truth. And a future. The same statement has been made by Victor Frankel, a Jew imprisoned in a Nazi death camp. And by Joni Earekson-Tada, a quadriplegic imprisoned in her wheelchair. All these people know that without belief in God, there can only be despair. Certainly this is nowhere more evident than in our ministry, as we stand with people caught up in the pain of crisis and grief. A few years ago, I remember talking to a woman who had gone through a particularly bad time. She said to me, “I’ve hit the bottom but I know I won’t go down any further. It’s as though I’m standing on a concrete floor and it’s solid.” This was a person whose house was built on a rock. For God is God, even when his presence is not easily felt.

But Isaiah believes in a God who intervenes. “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,” he prays. You see, the prophet knew that he was praying to a God who had a great record of intervention. He mentions the awesome things that God had done, intervening in the chaos of space and bringing order to life. Intervening in the life of Abraham, causing him to father a people chosen for himself. Intervening in the life of Moses, so that he would deliver these people from slavery.

Throughout the next four weeks of Advent, every appointed reading has that message at its centre. A message that tells how, in the fullness of time, God has intervened yet again in our lives, “rending the heavens over Bethlehem.” A God who “for us men and for our salvation” was born, a child of the woman, Mary. This is the God that you and I cry out to in our pain. In our moments of anguish and despair, this is a God who hears what we say. This is the God who Isaiah refers to as “the potter”...“We are the clay and he holds us in his

hands.” And this is the God who has told us that he will come again, to intervene in human lives yet again on the last day of history. To intervene as our saviour and our judge.

Finally, Isaiah asks that question all of us want to ask from time to time. For how many times have we, like him, said, “God, I know you have a marvellous record of intervention and miracle. And I believe that you will do it again, that you will come again in glory. *But what about now?* What about helping me out right at this moment? Why can’t I hear what you are saying? Why are you silent? Why don’t you do something?”

You may know the poem “Footprints”, the story of the man who had a dream that he was standing on a great beach with God. And God turned the man around so that he could look back over the journey they had made together along the beach. God said to the man, “There, my friend, look. I have always been with you. See the footprints in the sand.” But as the man looked back at his life as it was represented by footprints in the sand, he saw that there were times when there was only one set of prints trudging along the beach. Then he recalled that these were the very times when he had known trouble and distress in his life. So he turned to God with questioning eyes and said, “Look, Lord. Why is it that whenever I was distressed and lonely you left me all alone?” And God turned to him and said, “My beloved child. I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

You and I need to remember that, in times of trouble, God is always present in our lives. And although he wants very much to intervene with the miracle of his love and forgiveness and peace, we often fail to realize that he is closer to us than we are to ourselves. So often, we worship God with our lips but our hearts and minds are far away. The God we meet in church, the God that we meet in his word, the God that we meet in bread and wine – his singular desire is that we permit

him to rend the heavens and come down into our deepest selves. But first, we must invite him. For he has told us, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone should hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and I will live with him.” God never leaves his children. He has told us so. Take his word for it.

*Lord, I've just come from church and we seemed to have missed one another! It was probably my fault – I went with too much baggage! And yet, here I am again – caught by that love that will not let me go! I don't understand.*

*How much I need to know your love – to find relief from my troubles – rest from my tiredness – escape from my guilt.*

*Grant me new eyes to see you,  
a new heart to feel you,  
new ears to hear you.*

*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down – and you have, in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## WHO NEEDS CHRISTMAS?

Luke 1:46-49

*And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."*

What a wonderful outpouring of trust and gratitude, what a depth of perception and love these profound verses contain! It is the Song of Mary, the Magnificat – known by Anglicans everywhere as the first canticle of Evensong. It is to be found in only one place in the New Testament, in the book of Luke. Recorded by that trusted physician just as Mary must have recited it to him all those years ago.

Why don't we take a few moments to let our imaginations roam a little? Why don't we travel to Nazareth and wander through the little village until we come to the place where Luke is sitting with Mary, now a woman in her late fifties. A woman whose wonderful memories are surfacing as she talks to the apostle about the events surrounding her son's birth and childhood. How attentively Luke must have listened to all her stories! How Mary's eyes must have lit up as she shared the treasured memories of her lifetime! And then perhaps, she may have paused a second. Shyly, she may have confessed to writing a poem – a song, based on the song of Hannah, mother of Samuel (1 Samuel 2). It is a poem which tells how she

feels about God. Luke begs to hear the poem, and listens very carefully as Mary tells it to him. Then he writes it all down. It is there for generations of people yet unborn to read. There in due course, for you and for me.

For in Mary's song, Luke must have recognized more than a passing appeal. He must have realized that it contained some very profound theology which he wanted the world to hear. Theology dealing with what God is really like. Theology dealing with how God feels about people. Theology dealing with what God does in people's lives. For the Magnificat contains certain incontrovertible truths. Truths which, I believe, expose three lies. Lies that you and I suffer from, and suffer a lot. The first is about Christmas. The second is about God. And the third is about ourselves.

It seems to me that the greatest of all Christmas lies is that which says Christmas comes to those who "have". It goes something like this.

A merry and happy Christmas will be yours if you have young children around you. If you have lots of money or enough credit to afford all the right things – good food, expensive gifts and pretty, decorated Christmas trees. If you have a family to go to. If you have good health. If you have happy memories of former Christmases ...

But if these things are not the case, if you are alone at Christmas, hungry, afraid...then that's another story. And so the lie goes on:

...But if you are out of work and out of money, tough luck! Christmas is not for you. If you have no young children around, too bad! You'll miss out on all the excitement. If you have to work on Christmas Day, well it's "game over", buddy! Better luck next year!

Of course it's a lie. A barefaced, insupportable, flagrant lie. The tragedy is that we half believe it. Even when in truth, we know that Christmas really comes to those who "have not". We see this most clearly in Mary's song. How great was her joy and surprise when she realized that God, the supreme architect of the Universe, had called her by her name. He had "regarded the low estate of his handmaiden" (certainly a "have-not") and filled her heart with gladness and joy. And do you remember how the first people to hear the news of Christ's birth were simple shepherds, sitting up all night taking care of their sheep? Not those who, warm and well-fed, slept peacefully in their comfortable beds. Not the rich and famous. Not princes, rulers or governors. But shepherds. "Have-nots". To them came the first, joyous incredible news of Christmas.

You see, it's not the material things in life that bring any lasting happiness. In our affluent society there are a lot of people who seem to have everything, yet often for them, Christmas can be a very miserable time indeed. When all the presents are unwrapped and all that remains of Christmas is a kitchen full of dirty dishes, then the bright smile begins to quiver as reality dowses the Christmas spirit. For without Christ at the centre of Christmas, all there is to look forward to when the festivities are over is a deluge of unpaid bills, a sad little pile of broken toys.

The second lie which the Magnificat exposes is a lie about God. It has to do with the direction of God's grace. We have all heard Christ's words "I am come that you should have life, and have it more abundantly". It is clear that God's plan for us involves more than poverty, sickness and pain. It is not God's will that the destitute, the lonely and the weak should stay that way. Mary's song is of a God who has chosen an ordinary "small town" girl of about sixteen years old. And he has raised her up so that "all generations shall call me blessed". He is God who does great things. A God whose min-

istry on earth brought hope to the rejects of society. A God who takes those who suffer, those who mourn, those who are sick, and exalts them. Lifts them up.

A short while ago, I was reading a little book by Charles Swindoll. It is called *Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back*. It's about how we deal with the real problems in life, and how God moves us ever forward, when we are willing to persevere. For God has promised that those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. "They will soar like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint."

The third message the Magnificat speaks to us about is the truth about ourselves. It tells us that God has said to us all, "You are worth lifting up." The central focus of the Christmas story is that God so loved and valued human life, that he took it upon himself. That for a short while – for about thirty years – he wrapped himself in human nature and became a man. Why? Because God considers us of value. All of us. And his son calls us back into a new redemptive relationship with himself.

Maurice Chevalier used to sing a song during the war about his beloved homeland, France. It went like this:

“France is broken,  
But the pieces are still good.”

As God looks at his world today, he sees it broken by war and violence, ravaged by terrorism and injustice. Addiction and disease are rampant. His people are greedy, power-seeking and full of pride. But somehow, in our brokenness, God judges the pieces of our lives to be good and of great worth. For the truth about ourselves is that we are not orphans in the universe, deserted, forgotten and unloved. We are the sons and daughters of God, men and women of value and worth.

And so, as the voice of Mary sings out with joy and wonder, "He that is mighty has magnified me and holy is his name", we too can let our voices soar with hers. For her song

is our song. It is a song for every Christian. A song for you and a song for me.

*It's just two weeks away Lord! Christmas, I mean!  
We'll be alone this year – but not without you. Through  
every carol and candle, every gift and card, may we  
find your love and peace and worship you in new joy.  
In Christ, Amen.*

## *Christmas*

# GOD HAS VISITED THE EARTH

John 1:10-14

*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

Somewhere in the annals of inter-stellar space, there is a rather poignant and touching story about an inter-planetary conference, where representatives from every world gathered to report to one another on the progress of their civilizations. There, seated around an oval table on some great space station, the various delegates awaited their turn to tell their colleagues about their achievements. One planet shared the good news that they had completely overcome disease and suffering. There was applause. Another talked about ending war and human conflict, and again, there was applause. Yet another boasted of a divorce rate that had been reduced to 5%. On and on the good news kept being announced. And there sat Earth, taking it all in and feeling more and more uncomfortable as its turn approached. During a coffee break, the Earth delegation got together in a corner and asked each other, "What can we

possibly tell them?” Disease and suffering are still around. War is still a fact of life. Marriage and family are not doing very well. Whatever can we say?” Eventually, their turn came. The chairman of the Inter-planetary council called upon Earth to mount the podium. With some hesitation, the delegate confessed to not having had the same success as other worlds. But then he paused. “But there was one thing that happened on Earth many years ago. It may seem a small thing, but at a point in time, God visited the Earth.” There was a hush. Much to the amazement of Earth, every delegate around that table was spellbound by the news. God had visited earth! And then the questions began. “How did he come?” The answer was: “Born in a barn.” “Why was he born in a barn?” they asked in amazement. “Well, there was no room for him,” admitted Earth, shamefaced. “But he grew up to be a man, a teacher and a great healer.” And then one of the delegates who hadn’t spoken before got up. “What did you do with him?” he asked. Earth’s delegate glanced unhappily around all the faces who were looking up at him with wonder and with awe... “Well, actually...,” he shuffled awkwardly on the podium. “Actually, we killed him. But he rose again. God visited the earth.”

A few days ago I was listening to a woman’s story about how, every year, she entertains eighteen members of her family for Christmas dinner. For weeks beforehand, she reads feverishly through all her cookbooks for new ideas, new recipes, something a little different for a change. Some duck, perhaps. Or lamb. Or B.C. Salmon...But despite all her intentions, when Christmas Day finally arrives, it’s the same old menu – roast turkey with all the trimmings, followed by Christmas Pudding! I smiled at this woman’s story because every Christmas a lot of preachers (myself included) go through the very same thing! Looking for a new approach. But invariably, if we are faithful to the message, we come back to that timeless tale of how God did visit the earth. We come back to the good news of Christmas, which is what God in Christ did for you and for me.

Back to the message of the angels that wondrous night in Bethlehem which was: “Human persons – mankind and womankind – I who made you am now becoming one of you, declaring to you in the strongest possible terms how valuable you are to me.” A message which is as valid today as it was two thousand years ago. A message we need now more than ever in our money-grabbing, “wired-for-sound”, synthetic world. The Word of our God, made Flesh for us.

I’m sure that there are many who, over the past year have gone through a crisis of some kind. Some who have lost something dear and special in their lives, a loved one or a valued friendship, a lost job or a broken marriage. There are some of us who will go to church alone and leave alone – desperately fighting off feelings of despondency, feelings of despair, a nagging little voice that says, “You’re nothing. Nobody cares, because you’re not worth caring about.” BUT GOD HAS VISITED THE EARTH. In the person of Jesus Christ, he has declared emphatically and unequivocally for all time, that we are worth caring about. “Come unto me an all you who are tired of holding up life on your own,” he said, “and I will refresh you.” God so loved the world, that he sent his only son. God has visited the earth and through the grace of Jesus Christ calls humanity into a new relationship with himself – a relationship in which we find out who we really are, where we really belong, and where we are going. Everyone of us needs to hear that. But we won’t hear it from our lighted tree or from our bottle of sherry. We may not even hear it from our families. Certainly neither micro chips nor any number of software packages will throw any light on that area either. How then may we know our potential? Know the possibility of becoming that which we were always intended to be?

In the stage play, *The Man of La Mancha*, the grand idealist, Don Quixote, meets a street girl by the name of Aldonza. “You shall be my lady,” he tells her. “Yes,” he goes on, “and I will give you a new name. The new name will be Dulcinea.”

She laughs at him. Undaunted, he keeps affirming her worth, declaring to her the possibility of what she could become. And then comes the scene where she is attacked and raped and beaten. She pulls herself across the stage, hysterical and afraid. Loud and clear comes the voice of the man from La Mancha. “My lady,” he says. She can’t handle this and screams, “Don’t call me you lady. I am only Aldonza. I am nothing at all.” As she runs away crying, Don Quixote calls after her, “But you are my Dulcinea.” The final scene of the play is the death scene of the glorious dreamer of the impossible dream. He is broken, laughed at, rejected by men. Suddenly, to his side comes a Spanish princess, beautiful and dignified in her mantilla and rich clothing. She is confident and she is strong. She kneels down beside him and prays. Dying, he looks up at her and asks, “Who are you?” She turns to him, her voice gentle and full of compassion. “You called me ‘your lady.’ You gave me a new name,” she said. “My name is Dulcinea.”

As you and I kneel at the communion rail for our Christmas communion, we will be surrounded by the very real presence of him who has said to us, “I know what you are. I accept you and I love you, just as you are. I will make you clean with my body and I will wash you with my blood, so that you may forever live in me. And I in you.” But this is no “impossible dream”. This is all possible. This is all true. We know it without any shadow of a doubt, because GOD HAS VISITED THE EARTH.

*The church was packed tonight, Lord, but now I'm alone! And it's good to be alone to feel the warmth of your Good News. The singing was great, the message was good. But now I know you in silence and in silence I find peace and a great joy – in Jesus.*

## *New Year's Day*

# A HITTITE IS ONLY A HITTITE

Numbers 13:17-18, 27-29

*Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, 'Go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country, and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many,' . . .*

*And they told him, 'We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan.'*

Happy New Year! We've been saying this a lot over the past few days, and sometimes I stop and wonder just what we really mean when we greet our friends in this way. What do we mean by "Happy"? And what are the things we hope for at the start of this New Year?

One of the most rewarding experiences for me at this Christmas season is taking Holy Communion to those who are sick or unable to get to church. Most of the people we visit are very elderly, and often we find ourselves in the presence of very strong, saintly people who, in spite of physical disability, loneliness and many other problems, persist in believing and in

hoping. They are the survivors. They make one realize that the difference between people is not that some have problems and some don't – because we all have problems and all of us suffer – the real difference is how people deal with these problems.

And so, as we face a new year, the issue is not whether I will be lucky enough to avoid pain. But rather, given the inevitable problems of bad health, stress, sadness and loneliness, how will I deal with them? Will I win the battle against despair? And how on earth can I strengthen myself for the struggle?

In the Old Testament book of Numbers, there is a vivid picture of some people who faced a very uncertain future. Under the leadership of Moses and Joshua, they had been liberated from slavery in Egypt and had spent several months journeying to the land where they once had lived. But now, they find the country is inhabited by strangers. Standing on the frontier of their promised land, Moses decides to send an advance party of twelve men to report on the condition of the land, whether it is still a good land and worth moving into, what the people are like who live there. So the spies are sent out and, for six weeks, they make their investigations. Then they return with the news that what they saw was a good land flowing with milk and honey, but that the people of the land were strong as giants, and lived in great walled cities that seemed impregnable.

What we have here is a very familiar situation that you and I know all too well. Whenever we seek to achieve an object or a goal in life, it seems that there are always problems in our way. For the Hebrews, the problems were the Amalekites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites and the Canaanites... a lot of 'ites'! But the crucial thing was whether or not they could repossess the land that was their home. The committee was split. Out of the twelve spies, ten reported that the problems ahead were insurmountable, "We saw giants there and we were as grasshoppers before them." In other

words, faced with their problems, this group felt very small and helpless. So they said, “Let’s go back. Retreat. No way can I face this thing.” A lot of us know all about that feeling.

There was a second opinion, albeit a minority report. Two of the spies told Moses how beautiful the land was. True, the people lived in walled cities and they were well armed. But, with confidence these two said, “Let us go at once and possess it. We can easily overcome the people.” What a difference in attitude! Faced with the same struggle, the same stone wall, two men had the gall to say, “We can overcome.”

All of us face an uncertain future. In the year that lies ahead of us, we must all deal with challenges and crises and problems. True, we don’t call them Hittites and Jebusites, but they are powerful and terrifying nonetheless. Like the spies of the Hebrews, we are divided into those who are willing to “hang in there” and endure, and those who are not. According to the story, it was obvious which was the best way to go. It was clear that God’s plan for his people was that they should move at once. But how could they do that? How could Caleb and Joshua stand against such odds and say, “We are able to overcome”? How can you and I, faced with the Amorites and Hittites of our future say, “I’ll survive. I’ll win. I’ll make it.” What ground did Caleb and Joshua stand on? What ground do we stand on?

In Chapter 14 (verse 9) we learn a bit more about Caleb and Joshua’s strength. Standing there with confidence, they say to the Israelites, “If the Lord loves us, he will bring us into this land”. They are reassuring about the “giants” who inhabit the region, “Fear not these people, for their strength is taken from them,” they say. And with conviction they add, “The Lord is with us.” You see, these men had a profound conviction about God. It had nothing to do with their own ability, but rather in God’s ability to involve himself redemptively in the daily lives of his people. They had grasped a truth that the others had not seen, and their truth was in three parts. First of all, we are who we are. Secondly, God is who he is. And thirdly, a Hittite is only a Hittite.

Joshua and Caleb knew who they were. They knew that God had not created them and brought them out of slavery to the threshold of a new home just to have them sit there, trembling and afraid. He had a plan for his people, of that they were sure. And we can be equally sure that God has planned each and every one of us, too. Even if we were not planned by our fathers and mothers, God planned us. For you and I are not just chance products of random evolution, we have a reason and purpose for being here. We are the sons and daughters of a living God.

Today, as we move further and further into a “high tech” era of computerized communications, one of the most negative by-products is an increased human isolation and loneliness. Indeed, according to an article I read recently while sitting in a doctor’s waiting room, “the primary struggle in the future will be loneliness and the quest for human love, in a world overwhelmed by too much information.” In the face of this, you and I need to know who we are, and to know that our lives have meaning and purpose in a world that is becoming increasingly “dehumanized”.

I remember a young girl in a parish in Windsor, Ontario where I served once. Her name was Barbara and she was a member of a small youth group that used to meet on Sunday night. I remember sitting with the youngsters and asking them to ponder the issue of what God seemed like to them. One girl described God as a great man with a stern, a long white beard, sitting on a huge throne in Heaven, looking at us all. Barbara listened to this, sat thoughtfully for a while and then said to me, “Well, I’m not sure what he looks like, but I don’t believe he’s sitting down. I don’t see him sitting. I see him walking around.” To that young girl of fourteen, God was not a God of inactivity. He was a God of action who involved himself in people’s lives. Not just a God to maintain and protect us but a God to lead us and inspire us. A God of possibilities. A God of adventure.

Certainly to Joshua and Caleb, God was just that. They saw the possibilities. “Do not fear the enemy,” they said. “They are bread for us. Their defence is taken from them. A Hittite is only a Hittite.” You see, because they knew that they could count on God’s leadership, the enemy suddenly appeared less terrifying. Somehow, they no longer saw the Hittites as invincible giants. They felt equal to the task they knew God had set them.

As you and I face the new year with all its possible hardships and sorrows, we need to know that God does not always remove obstacles from our path. What he does do is to reduce our fear of them, giving us the energy to cope with whatever comes our way. All we need do is trust in him and, like Joshua and Caleb, he will lift us up to where we can see the enemy for what it is – something to overcome. For, with God to support us, to inspire, protect and lead us, an obstacle is only a challenge. And a Hittite is only a Hittite.

*Heavenly Father, you have created us in your own image, we are your Sons and Daughters and without you, life is nothing at all.*

*Grant us courage as we begin the new year. May your word remind us daily that as your children, we are people of value and worth; that you stand with us in the power of your Spirit and that my enemy will be overcome – so that in all the “changes and chances of this mortal life” we may remain a faithful people – a believing people!*

*Through the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## *First Sunday of Lent*

# IT'S A LIE!

Matthew 4:1-4

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Every now and then, we read in our newspapers heart-wrenching accounts of how some parents abuse their children. One such case was reported a few years ago about a child from Massachusetts, whose parents kept her locked in a closet for most of her life. Deprived of socialization and without any kind of education, the young girl knew only abuse and neglect. Finally, at the age of fifteen she was found and rescued. After much intensive therapy in a new environment where people loved her, she gradually began to realize a sense of self-worth. At the trial of her parents, the judge asked her if she had anything to say. Shaking almost out of control and wracked with sobs, she banged the desk with her fist and, looking up at her parents cried out in anguish, "You lied to me. You lied to me. I *am* a Somebody. You lied to me."

One of the most frightening books that I have read is entitled *People of the Lie* by Dr. Scott Peck. It is a book about human evil – what makes bad people bad and where evil comes

from. It is Dr. Peck's thesis that evil in human life is often the result of ordinary people believing a lie. A lie about themselves. A lie about God. A lie about another race. A lie about a friend. People whose whole lives are wrongly focused because they have confused the truth with what is false.

The other evening we were discussing Shakespeare's *Othello*. We were talking about the influence that Iago had over his master, how he persuaded the moor to believe a lie. To believe that his wife, Desdemona had been unfaithful. And so the evil Iago destroyed Othello – all through the power of a lie.

The power of a lie is illustrated most graphically in our Scripture readings today. We are shown the evil one – Satan, as the Father of Lies. In the first book of Genesis he is dressed up as a snake, and his outrageous lie is believed – with dire consequences for the human race. In Matthew's gospel, Satan is depicted as a voice in the wilderness. This time, his lie is rejected and countered with the truth.

What the devil was offering to Jesus were some very easy solutions to the basic needs of his life. First, the need for satisfaction. Secondly, the need to be recognized for who he really was. And thirdly, the need to exercise a degree of control over his own life. Three basic needs which you and I can relate to, for we too need to feel that we are effective, valued and self-reliant. So the devil comes to Jesus with suggestions as to how he can satisfy these needs – exciting, dramatic suggestions. Exciting, dramatic lies. You see, the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness is a kind of flashback to the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – temptation they did not resist. It is somehow the genius of the Evil One to know where we are most vulnerable. To know the weak points in our lives. And so he comes to Jesus recognizing that he was hungry, and offers the lie that bread will satisfy that hunger. You and I live in the most affluent part of the world. We are part of a society that sees the material world as a panacea of all ills.

A society that believes technology, medical miracles, government assistance and better education can and will totally satisfy the human spirit. This belief becomes a sort of religion. It is what Satan was trying to sell Jesus – the proposition that there is a fast food outlet somewhere to meet every need. That being human is fundamentally an organic, sensual material experience and therefore our needs can be completely satisfied with material things. But Jesus says firmly, “That is a lie. We cannot live on bread alone”... for the human experience is more than just physical existence. It is spiritual as well, and only the things of the spirit can satisfy our deepest needs. And so we need a word of love. A word of forgiveness. A word of peace. A word about our worth.

A number of years ago, my parish in London, Ontario, sent a gift to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. In response, she wrote us these words, “Thank you for your gift for it will feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty and clothe the naked. But please,” she asked us, “Please pray for us that we may be able to satisfy their hunger for God, their thirst for peace, truth and justice.” As we respond to the very real material needs of the Third World and developing countries, we need to be aware of these words. Aware that food, medicine and technology may sustain life, but will not satisfy the deep human longing for justice, for freedom and for truth. This is the cry of the refugee, the homeless and the oppressed. It is also the cry of the affluent society... “We cannot live on bread alone. Give us justice, equality, truth and love, for we are so tired of the lie.”

The second lie that Satan tells Jesus involves the need to be recognized, to be a success. Jesus needed to be a success. After all, he was the Messiah, he was the Prince of Peace. So the temptor takes him to the top of the temple and he says to him, “Jump! You’ll be a superstar overnight! Angels will come and lift you up. You’ll be a sensation!” But Jesus replies firmly, “Thou shalt not tempt God.” There is something inside each one of us that drives us toward achievement and fulfil-

ment. All of us need to be good at something. I often stood outside my church at 8 o'clock on a weekday morning and looked at all the people going to work. There is a kind of energy in the crowd, an almost tangible throbbing to achieve, to be a success. And that's not in itself a bad thing. But there is a lie about success and about recognition.

On the cover of *Esquire* magazine a number of years ago, there were the words, "Success: the Religion of the 80s." Inside was an article called "The Ethics of Success," written by Harry Stein. With great insight, he recognizes that despite the modern obsession to be successful, the vast majority will be disappointed for in the end, the profound money hunger that is so prevalent in our society mirrors an equally profound bankruptcy of the spirit. An aching need to be recognized that can never be satisfied by dollars.

Jesus was saying to the temptor that the kind of success and recognition that really satisfies us comes from God. We cannot grasp it for ourselves and when we seek fame above all else, we have failed. And so Jesus said to the Evil One, "I don't have to jump to be important. I already am. God has made me that way."

Finally, Satan comes to Jesus with a lie about power. Showing him the nations of the world, he says to him, "You can own it all. I will give it all to you. Just bow down for a few seconds and worship me...that's all you have to do. It's easy!" You see, the lie that we are tempted to believe is the lie that the world is not God's world at all. It is ours. Certainly, this is the predominant lie of secularism. Satan says, "All this I will give you." But the truth is, it's not his to give.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, speaking at a convocation in Boston a number of years ago said, "The great tragedy of Western civilization is that it has abandoned God and has therefore forfeited its soul." Jesus gives us the opportunity to put the trappings of materialism into perspective, for true power comes from God alone. It comes from being on our

knees more than on our grandstands. It comes from knowing who we are – children of God created in His image. It comes from recognizing God’s truth and dedicating ourselves to his service, in a world that belongs not to us at all, but to him who made it. For to believe otherwise is to believe a lie. The lie of the Evil One.

*God our Father, you created your world to be a place of harmony and peace. But evil has corrupted that harmony and shattered our peace.*

*We find ourselves, too often “conformed to the world” and tempted to believe the lies of the evil one!*

*Help us each day to find in your Word, the truth of our identity, our worth, our value – so that we may find in Jesus, life in all its fulness.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Lent*

## HARRY'S FLAW

Luke 13:1-3

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."*

Some time ago, a college friend of mine – the rector of a flourishing parish in another diocese – was telling me the tragic story of a former curate of his, a very gifted young man who showed great promise. Full of charisma and personal charm, he had come to the parish loaded with enthusiasm and new ideas. My friend had great hopes for him. But unfortunately, within months, problems began to arise. Little by little, stress and tension started to appear in parish life, where there had not been stress and tension before. Eventually, the rector was called in by the bishop, and given a whole list of complaints which had been submitted by the curate. Complaints about the rector's leadership. From then on things went from bad to worse until eventually, the curate moved to another parish. But the problem didn't end there. Within a few weeks the same pattern had begun to develop in his new parish. Within a year, his wife left him. On and on it went. And so the tragedy continued. "But why?" I asked my friend. "What in the world was wrong? How could such a promising young person have

‘blown it’ so totally?” My friend had a simple answer to my question. He said, “Harry had one flaw. He could never be wrong. He always had to be right.”

Perhaps you’ve had the experience when you’ve been travelling, of making small talk with the person beside you. Perhaps you’ve made a comment on something you’ve just read in a newspaper or a magazine. Perhaps you have exclaimed, “Look at this, isn’t it tragic!” As you read an account of something in the newspaper that’s gone wrong, you agree, “Isn’t it tragic! Isn’t it awful!”

Well, such was the occasion recorded in the thirteenth chapter of Luke. A number of people were trying to get Jesus’ ear and they said, “Did you hear about the Galileans? Isn’t it a tragedy? What bad people they must have been!” Jesus said to them, “Yes, but did you also hear about those people who died when the tower of Siloam collapsed on them? That was a tragedy too. But really,” Jesus went on, “these things are pretty small compared with the tragedy that could happen to you. For unless you repent, you too will all likewise perish.”

You see, what Jesus was doing was pointing out that tragedy can strike us too. Taking a casual comment, he turned it back to the issue of our personal tragedy – a tragedy with eternal implications. A tragedy centred in the fact that God calls us to an abundant life, but we often ignore his call and go our own way. A way which leads ultimately to despair and disaster. “Don’t wait for the world to fall in on you,” Jesus is saying. “God has marvellous plans for your life, but you are blocking him. Repent before it’s too late.”

Now repentance is a religious word, rather old-fashioned by today’s standards I suppose. But it is nevertheless a word which still holds a great deal of meaning for you and for me when it comes to our social, mental and spiritual health. And it all has to do with a serious and fatal flaw in our human nature ... our need to be right.

In one of his books, Bruce Larsen writes:

I'm convinced that many of us have an inordinate need to be right, and that need is a considerable block to the happy, healthy life that God wants to give us. It takes a lot of psychic energy to maintain this constant posture of rightness, and eventually our bodies are going to pay the price for the stress that results.

Our bodies and our souls too, it seems. For until we can let go of that crippling need always to be right, we are unable to say, "I was wrong. I'm sorry. I blew it." Dr. J.I. Packer defines repentance as "a sincere willingness to be changed." If we can't admit failure, how can we open ourselves to God's healing power in our lives?

At this time of year, during the lenten season, I get a lot of hope from thinking about Simon Peter. As we read of the events leading up to the cross, Peter is portrayed as a man who is often impetuous and hasty. All too often he gets things all wrong and ends up "blowing it." When the Lord tells him "You will forsake me," Peter says, "Not me." When Jesus says, "I need to wash your feet," Peter replies, "Not my feet." Then Jesus says, "You will deny me," and Peter is shocked. "Not me, Lord," he answers confidently. But he does, and suffers agonies of remorse and guilt. But Peter is a survivor. Why? Because although he has made a complete mess of things, he has the willingness and the humility to admit his failure, to confess that he was wrong. And so he is given the strength to get up and try again.

Far more intelligent than Peter was Judas Iscariot. Perhaps the most gifted of all the disciples, he was a man of considerable ability and promise. But Judas had a fatal flaw. He did not know – or did not choose to know – the God of compassion and mercy. The God who was willing to forgive him and heal all his infirmities. And so Judas, it seemed, did not ask forgiveness and lived out his own tragic agenda to the end.

Some time ago, I read the story of Charles R. Sumner, a young curate who at thirty years of age was appointed chaplain to King George IV. One Wednesday morning as was his custom, he was taking Holy Communion to the King. As he approached the royal quarters, he found the monarch harshly berating one of his servants, using every expletive in the English language. When Sumner discovered that the servant had committed only a very minor infraction, he told the King that he did not seem in a fit state to receive Holy Communion until he had forgiven his servant. Asking permission to withdraw, Sumner then left the King's apartment. Eventually, the King reinstated his servant. But then the young cleric suggested that His Majesty should not receive Holy Communion alone, but that he should invite his family and his servant to join him at the altar. For a while the King hesitated. But finally, he agreed and the monarch, his family and his servant all knelt at the Lord's table together to receive the sacrament.

Certainly Charles Sumner showed considerable courage in this incident. But Jesus makes it very clear that social standing buys no privilege in God's kingdom. You and I live in an age when the admission of failure is often seen as a sign of weakness, "the successful are never wrong." Such was the flaw in Richard Nixon, one of the most pathetic figures in modern American history. Mr. Nixon was caught in a minor scandal which might quickly have been forgotten had he not been so vehement in his own defence. What was his undoing? It was his insistence on his own innocence. As James McCord of Princeton Theological Seminary once wrote, "To sin is man's condition. To pretend he is not a sinner is man's sin." Indeed, when Jesus turns to his followers and says, "Unless you repent, you too will perish," we know he speaks to us too. Can we afford to ignore his words?

*Lord Jesus, thank you that I don't have to be up all the time; always nice; always right. Thank you for the gift of humility whereby I can admit my weakness and in that confession, find your acceptance, forgiveness and new Grace to begin a brand new day. Amen.*

## *Lent*

# GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY?

Matthew 18:21-22

*Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*

The American writer, Flannery O’Connor, in one of her letters characterized the conscience of our age as “unhistorical, solitary, and guilty.” Probably many of us can relate to the first two words, especially students and young people. But I’m sure that for every one of us it’s the third word – guilty – which we recognize as being particularly true. For in the American and Canadian consciousness, we are a people who feel guilty. Any psychiatrist, any social worker, any counselor or priest will tell us that unresolved guilt is the source of much suffering in many people’s lives. In every human crisis, guilt lurks there in the shadows, a potentially paralyzing force.

I remember a doctor once telling me how he was treating a young girl whose mother had died when she was born. Several years later, at the age of seven, she had been misbehaving and an Aunt had snapped at her angrily: “It’s because of you that your mother died.” The girl carried a huge burden of guilt on her shoulders from that day on. And all too often, when someone close to us dies, among the many emotions we feel is remorse for all the unkind things we’ve said and regret for all the things we might have done. Even in the case of a

marriage breakdown, not only do both partners feel guilty, but often the children feel it's all their fault...“if only I hadn't been bad, Dad (or Mom) wouldn't have left.” We feel guilty about things we do, guilty about things we don't do, guilty about things we say. And that guilt can cripple us. It can tear us apart, and we need desperately to do something about it.

There has been a lot written about guilt and how to get rid of it, but I believe that Matthew's gospel contains some of the most sensitive and insightful words of all. In today's reading, the evangelist declares that healing for guilt is to be found in an experience called forgiveness, “in the settling of accounts.” We hear the story about how Jesus was talking about the kingdom of Heaven, and comparing it with a King who wished to settle the outstanding accounts of all his servants. You see, one way of looking at guilt is as an emotional and spiritual response to an unsettled account. You see, guilt springs from a feeling of indebtedness, when we feel we owe something we can never repay. When we feel we are responsible for things that go wrong. So what the New Testament calls forgiveness is, in fact, a settling of accounts. It is an action that God takes on our behalf.

Now, I think it is necessary for us to define two kinds of guilt: guilt by transgression, and guilt by association. In religious terms, guilt by transgression means we are guilty of sin because of some thought, word or action which violates what we know to be right. All of us have experienced this kind of guilt. “All men have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and we are living a lie.” This kind of guilt comes to us as a kind of reminder that we have an unsettled account. An account that we can still settle – with God's grace. This kind of guilt often has a positive side. In many instances, it is God telling us that we need to take a look at ourselves. We need to make some changes. We need to settle the score.

Guilt by association is something different. This is the kind of irrational guilt that children feel when their parents

separate. It is the guilt that parents feel when their child gets into trouble with the law. It is the guilt that people often feel after the death of a loved one. It is the guilt that results from an event or crisis over which one has little or no control. Usually, it is the result of caring for someone, loving someone, and feeling responsible for that person. It is a very hurtful, destructive guilt, a guilt that is totally non-productive, for it cannot reconcile a marriage, bring back the dead, or restore someone's health. And yet, it's there.

In terms of our reading, our accounts cannot be settled by anything that we ourselves can do. We see in the parable a man who is facing a debt he cannot possibly pay. Ten thousand talents. Picture it in present day terms – perhaps it would be ten million dollars. There was nothing he could possibly do to settle that debt. He tries to kid himself...if only he had more time. "Have patience, and I will pay you all," he pleads. But no amount of time will change his situation. And he feels guilty. But just when all seems lost, someone involves himself in that man's life. A king, who wished to settle accounts. He was the only person who could rescue the man, and he did. The king had compassion and forgave his servant. The man was free.

There is some good news here for you and for me. Especially good news for those of us who carry a heavy load of unresolved guilt. For we are told that there are some accounts which, no matter what we do, we can never, ever settle. And they lie heavily upon us. Somehow, it's comforting to hear that, as members of the human race in a broken and sinful world, we cannot possibly escape the collective guilt of our age. We are all of us part of it. And we all owe more than we can ever, possibly pay.

Another thing that I find comforting about this parable is what the King did for his servant. You see, at a point in time there once was a Man who moved into our situation, who moved into our world of unsettled accounts, our world of sin

and guilt, and did for us the very same thing. He released us from guilt by forgiving our debt. In Jesus Christ, God the Father walked upon this earth and did for us what no human person could ever do. Because of his great love for us, he accepted the cross, thereby settling our indebtedness for all time. As Paul's epistle to the Romans reads: "There is no longer any condemnation for those who are in Christ," meaning that through a relationship with him, we may find that very special forgiveness that is utterly therapeutic. God does not want us to carry around a load of useless guilt all our lives. In Christ, he declares our account with him to be settled. Wiped out. Forgiven.

A number of years ago, during a children's mission we invited the young people to respond by writing little letters to God. After a few minutes, one of the workers called me over to show me what one little boy had written. Handing me a rather grubby sheet of paper, I read the painstaking, childish script. It said, "Thank you God that you're not mad at me any more." You see, this small child had completely grasped what God's forgiveness is all about. It's about being relieved of the burden of guilt we all carry around with us. It's about having the confidence to stand tall, knowing that our account with God is settled. It's about our gratitude and relief and wonder as we, together with that small child, say with joy in our hearts, "Thank you God, that you're not mad at me any more."

*Father, too often I find myself denying any guilt – defending myself against your judgment, trying so hard to justify what has to be wrong! Grant me a new spirit of honesty to confess a life of "unsettled accounts" – to accept your invitation to find forgiveness and peace and to reflect your love in my dealings with others.*

*In His name – who is our peace – Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## *Holy Week*

# SUPER POSSIBILITIES

Luke 19:41-42

*As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.*

Every now and again, usually around Eastertime, there is a particularly beautiful National Geographic Special which appears on our television screens. It is about the city of Jerusalem. Packed with powerful images of its many vibrant cultures, the camera captures something of the drama of human interaction as it is played out against an ancient backdrop – the historical walls of this throbbing city.

As one looks upon Jerusalem as it is today, one's thoughts invariably turn to the Jerusalem of the Bible. To the Jerusalem Jesus Christ knew as he went about his life and work almost two thousand years ago. To the city he walked in and taught in; to the city he wept over one day, as he paused for a few moments on his journey from the Mount of Olives to the temple there. And one finds oneself wondering what makes a man of thirty look at a city, a beautiful and great city, and weep. Why would Jesus of Nazareth, sitting there on a hill overlooking one of the most beautiful cities in the world, have his eyes full of tears?

Even in the first century AD, Jerusalem was already great. At the crossroads of the international centres of trade and commerce, it was a wealthy city; a city with the highest

values in the world. A city proclaimed to be the dwelling place of God himself. If you wanted to know the truth about God, you went to this city. You visited its temple and spoke with its priests. Even then, it was a holy city. And yet God's son looked down at all this wealth and privilege and wept. "If only you had really known where true peace was to be found," he said sadly. "But it's too late. You've missed it."

What Jesus could see was the spiritual emptiness of Jerusalem, the decadence and despair of its political and religious leaders, who had traded their faith for political advantage. So much so that when the biggest opportunity of their lives came along, when God's son rode through their streets on a donkey, they took no notice. "Keep him out of our way," they said. "We've got more important things to do."

I remember being at a conference some years ago. We were sharing some of the things in our lives that were important to us. One man began to talk about his son, a boy who had grown up in a privileged environment, who had been offered every advantage his parents could provide – a loving home, an excellent education, first-rate opportunities for building a future to be proud of. But he had thrown it all away, and was missing out on the secure, satisfying life that might have been his. With tears in his eyes, the father looked at us all and said sadly, "What a waste. What a waste."

It was surely something of this spirit that was in Jesus when he looked at the city he loved, which had missed the golden moment of its history. Jerusalem had failed to take advantage of her opportunity and, as a direct result, became open prey to her enemies. Today, all that remains of the city Jesus gazed upon is a single wall. Part of the Temple of Herod, it's known throughout the world as the Wailing Wall. And Jesus wept.

So what is the message for us in this sad little story? It seems to me that it has to do with opportunities, those opportunities for living that God sends our way. How to recognize

them when they come. What to do with them. You see, one of Jerusalem's problems was that the people no longer expected much from God. His plans for them had ceased to be a reality in their lives. And aren't we in danger of the very same thing? How much do we really expect from God? What do we expect? Do we really, deep down inside, believe that God has a plan for each and every one of us, and that we will be offered opportunities to co-operate in that plan at different times in our lives?

Some years ago, my wife and I were looking to buy a new home. We saw dozens of houses. I remember an agent taking us into an older home in a part of town we really wanted to live in. The place was a total mess. It had been duplexed, de-duplexed, then duplexed again. And it was dirty. The kitchen had few facilities and it needed an enormous amount of work. But the real estate agent kept saying, "Bill, this has super possibilities. Super possibilities." And she was probably right! When God looks at us, he somehow has the capacity to look past all the mess, the weakness and the confusion, and see all the "super possibilities" for our lives. He sees strengths we may not know we have. He sees a capacity for peace and happiness we have never known. But all too often, our possibilities remain just that – opportunities never quite realized, resources that remain untapped.

But how can we recognize God's moment when it comes? How does God make opportunities available to us, and how can we recognize them for what they are?

Some time ago, in one of my congregations, I needed a chairman for a stewardship committee. The future of that parish, in part, depended upon the success of the campaign, and finding an effective person was a task that gave me some concern. I decided on the best man for the job – a committed Christian and a highly successful businessman – but he was probably the busiest man in the congregation. Knowing his heavy schedule, I doubted he would accept this additional duty. I asked him to lunch and put the question to him. "You

know, Bill,” he said to me, “I have a policy, and it’s been a great source of blessing to me. Whenever the church asks me to give something – my time, my money – I look on it as an opportunity, and I always say ‘Yes.’ “ Our stewardship campaign was in business, and I had learned a principle. It was very simple. I learned that God’s possibilities in our lives are actualized in us when we are given an opportunity to give – to give of our time, our commitment, ourselves – and we say, “Yes, I can do that.”

You see, this is where Jerusalem failed. Over the centuries, the prophets of God had called upon the city to give; to become the centre of mission for the whole world; the centre of God’s plan to reach out to all nations with his message of justice, peace and love. But when the moment came, when God’s son rode through the streets of Jerusalem and everyone had the opportunity to glorify him, to give themselves totally to him, they said, “No.” They refused to commit themselves. They missed their opportunity. And then, suddenly it was too late. So the Son of God sat on a hill overlooking their city, and he cried for them.

Are we prepared to watch out for the opportunities God gives us in our lives, you and me? Opportunities to serve him and to give of ourselves to others, in our homes, in our jobs, in the church? Opportunities to co-operate in the wonderful plan God has for our lives? Are we prepared to say “Yes” and share our talents, our skills and our compassion with the people we meet in our daily lives? Or will we say “No” and ignore the opportunities which come our way. And shut ourselves up in our own little walled cities. Until one day, it will be too late. And then we will realize that it was for us too, that the Son of God wept.

*So much of my life, Lord, is incomplete! I know what I want to do, but somehow I've lost the plan! What I need is a new vision of what can be. Show me, Lord Jesus, the possibilities of my life yet unexperienced. Forgive my blindness and the sins of missed opportunity. Free me from the fear of hard decisions and draw me ever closer to yourself. In Christ. Amen.*

## *Holy Week*

# THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE CROSS

Luke 23:39-40, 42-43

*One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?*

*Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

It is the time of year when people are making some very serious decisions. School boards are deciding on the number of teachers they will need for September. Many high school students are deciding on which colleges or universities to attend. Those graduating from post-secondary education are looking at job opportunities and deciding which path to take. Making these kind of decisions is certainly not easy.

Over lunch the other day, a man was telling me about his new boss and how well things were going at work because of this person. I asked him what, in particular, made this new manager so effective. "Well, he's a decision maker," I was told. "He doesn't just sit on the fence, or run away when there are tough issues to decide." And I thought how true it is that without decisions there can be no progress.

I remember counselling a woman some years ago who suffered a lot from depression and a sense of isolation. She told me that she had few friends and found it hard even to like

herself. As her story unfolded, an interesting pattern began to emerge. All her life, this woman had found it hard to make decisions. In her early years, she had been engaged to be married three times. Each time she had backed out. She'd been offered scholarships to further her education and jobs she might have enjoyed. But she could never decide whether to accept them or not. Somehow, as I listened to her story, I began to see how every refusal to make a choice brought with it more despair, more depression.

In the next few weeks as Easter approaches, we will be focusing on the dramatic events which led to the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. If you and I were to read the last four chapters of each of the gospels, we would find a fascinating thing: we would see how, as Christ moves nearer and nearer to the cross, he confronts people with the necessity of making a decision. There seems to be something almost electric about him as he moves from place to place, and wherever he is, he forces people to make a decision about him. He rides through the streets of Jerusalem on a donkey and, by his action challenges the people to decide who he really is. Some tell him to leave, some tell the disciples to keep him quiet. Some start to make plans to put him to death. But there are others who recognize him for who he is. Who make a courageous decision and say, "This is the Messiah, the chosen one of God."

Reading any part of the gospel story, one cannot fail to see how Jesus puts himself in the very centre of the human situation, forcing men and women to choose and to live out the consequences of that choice. We read how King Herod makes a decision about Jesus, how Pilate makes a decision too. How the priests in the Sanhedrin make their decision. And how the crowd, offered a choice between Jesus and Barabbas chose the murderer over the Son of God. And then we come to the cross itself. As we are told in the gospels, "people stood by and watched." I imagine myself standing there in that

crowd, standing in the midst of very ordinary people, just like you and me, all trying to make up their minds. All trying to decide, “Who is this man, Jesus? What should I think about him? Are the things he spoke about true?” Like us, these people were standing very much on safe, neutral ground. There are a lot of people like that. People who just stand by and watch, not making any decisions, just taking the middle ground and not getting involved. As one man said to me, “Man, I have to keep my options open”... it’s all too easy to shy away from commitment.

As we continue to read the gospel story, we find that the writer’s attention focuses on the two men who are being crucified next to Jesus. Two criminals, one on the right side and the other on the left. Both condemned men. Both dying. Both hear Jesus and, in their dying moment, both make a decision about him.

The first of the criminals to speak takes the attitude of the rulers and the soldiers. He insults Jesus saying, “If you are the Christ, then save yourself and us. Save me. But I know you can’t.” It’s easy, isn’t it, to get on the bandwagon of negativity, especially when one is suffering and in pain. It’s not difficult to understand where this man is coming from.

He represents many who have gone through life on their own, who have done things their way according to their own rules. The results of a life based on self-gratification are cynicism, anger and lost hopes. Very much a dying in every sense. Bitterness to the end.

On the other side of Jesus hangs the other criminal. He too has received a sentence of death. He too has heard the same things, heard what Jesus was accused of, heard who he claimed to be. He, like the other man, was a criminal. He had hurt people and destroyed property. He, like the man who was dying on the other side of Christ, had lived by his own rules. But dying, he accepts Jesus. And the Son of God turns to him and says, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.”

Now, what has happened here? All we have by way of an answer is two verses in the gospel. But in them, we are shown the way to find salvation through Jesus Christ. You see, this man made a choice, and that choice involved three steps. First of all, he asked, “Do you not fear God?” What he meant was that he needed to come to terms with the God who had created him. The God who would judge him. The God to whom he must answer. The God who would have the last word about his life. By that simple question, he was saying, “God is an issue here. He is involved in all of this. Involved with my living and my dying.” So the first step in choosing the road that leads to life is coming to grips with the fact that no matter where I’m at in my life, God is an issue. An issue in my marriage, in my job, in my schoolwork, in my retirement. “Do you not fear God?”

The second step this man took lay in the words, “We are justly punished.” In saying this, the condemned man acknowledges the real problem of his life. He acknowledges that it is he who has sinned, and therefore it is he who must suffer the consequences. He doesn’t pretend it’s a problem with the system, or with the church, or with his parents. He confesses that the problem lies with him alone.

In an address given in Toronto, Malcolm Muggeridge talked about the “true crisis of our time.” He claimed that the real crisis is not the energy crisis, or the nuclear crisis, or the employment crisis, but the crisis as to what is “the Good” and what is “the Evil.” He believes that our society has confused the two, and that what it claims to be good is not really good at all. The result is moral confusion. “Modern fiction portrays “the Good” as boring and flat, where evil things are portrayed as exciting or thrilling. What counts is success and celebrity, rather than a broken and a contrite heart.” If we are to choose life, we cannot play games with what is “the Good” and what is evil. Instead we must join our voices with the man dying next to Jesus, and admit our guilt saying that we indeed

deserve punishment. In the words of the old gospel hymn, “It’s me, Oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Not my brother or my sister but it’s me, Oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

Finally, having said something about God and something about himself, the dying criminal does something else. He turns to Jesus and says, “Lord, remember me.” One of our basic human needs is our need to be recognized for what we are, a person with worth and value. So often, many of us cry out in anguish and despair, “No one understands me.” So many of us find that life is transformed when the right person recognizes our worth and makes us feel valued. The thief turns to Jesus and he says, “Lord Jesus, remember me. Recognize in me something worth saving. Something worth living for. Something worth dying for.” And Jesus does. “Today, you will be with me in paradise,” he says.

Two sides of the cross. Two decisions about Christ. You and I are standing in that crowd, waiting. Watching. Listening. We all have a choice to make, a choice which will affect the rest of our lives. A choice that no one else can make for us. The question is put to us by God’s Word. It is an urgent question and one that demands a decisive answer... “What side of the cross am I on?”

*Lord Jesus, in your great love you went to the cross to suffer and to die – for me! In your perfect sacrifice you made me worthy to stand before you – accepted, loved and forgiven.*

*Revive in me a “broken and contrite heart.” When I am tempted to stand back with the crowd on safe ground, challenge me to new commitment. So, by your grace, I may stand daily on the right side of the cross.  
In Jesus’ name.*

## *Good Friday*

# THE PICKET LINE

Luke 20:9-10

*He began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed."*

We are standing outside the walls of a great city, curiously gazing at a small crowd which is gathering on the roadside. Suddenly, we are aware that the air is charged with tension. Loud, angry voices are raised in argument. Somewhere, a child cries. On the other side of the road, a group of women huddle together. Silent. Waiting. Everywhere, a sense of foreboding mingles with the dust which fills the air.

We realize we are standing near a special place. It's not a pleasant place. In fact, it's the last place on earth that anyone would choose to be. Just off the main road, out of sight of the city residences, it's a foul-smelling place where garbage is dumped. Where the discarded, the unwanted is left to rot. For this is a place of death and execution. This is Golgotha.

Suddenly, there is a hush. Turning, we see that a man is being brought to this terrible place. A man the city has rejected. A man the city does not want. So they are bringing him here, to this garbage dump. To this place of death.

And then, we realize. Suddenly, we recognize the plot for we know it well. “He came unto his own, but his own received him not.” He, the son of God, entered our human drama as one of the actors. He, who wrote the original script, came to show us how it’s done. How the play should really unfold. And we rejected him. Scourged him. Put him to death.

Isn’t it interesting how, when we read the story of Good Friday, we are amazed. “How could it have happened?” we ask ourselves. “How could the world have taken God and crucified him? Just for being God. How could the world have rejected Jesus? He, who was so full of love and compassion. How could they possibly have killed him?” Well, just two weeks before the crucifixion, Jesus told a parable which throws some light on these questions. It is a parable with three messages.

The first concerns God’s plan for the world. It’s a good plan. God is the creator of life – a life in which there is order, where things grow strong and healthy. To oversee this life, God appoints a co-worker whom he places in a kind of “father-son” relationship, where the son is free, yet ultimately responsible to the father. Jesus says that God’s plan for people’s lives is something very personal and beautiful.

I remember, some time ago, reading a book by Bruce Larsen called *Thirty days to a New You*. He tells of a letter he had received from a friend, whose 17-year-old son had died tragically in a car accident. The father shares with Larsen a letter he had written to his son on the day he was born – a letter he had intended to give him on his 18th birthday. It went like this:

Dear Son,

There are so many things that I should like to tell you today. Bits of advice and words of suggestion for the life that awaits you. Suffice it to say that you and

your wonderful mother have made me the happiest man on earth. And now, you and I will be entering a father-son relationship. No matter what happens in the course of the years may this passage from the parable of the Prodigal Son ever govern and guide our relationship: “My son, you and I are always together, and all that I have is yours.”

Larsen goes on to say that he believes God has written a letter like this to each one of us. Before we were even a thought in our father’s mind or a seed in our mother’s womb, God knew our names and wrote us each a letter. In part, this letter says:

Dear John (or Angela, or Debbie, or James...)

There is nobody else in the world like you. Nobody with your past or your future. You are the only one that I have made, and I want to tell you who you are, and my dream for your future. Let me into your life so that my plan for you can be actualized in everyday terms. My plan is that you will be free. Free to know who you are, so that you will be responsible to me, not in fear, but in love.

The second message involves a kind of picket line. In it, we see the human response to God’s letter – to God’s plan for our lives. According to the parable, God waits awhile to hear from the man he has put in a position of trust. When no word comes, God sends his messenger to the man with another letter. This one simply reads:

We’ve lost contact. Have you read my letter? What are you doing about my plan for your life?

Then the man responds. He says, “God, we don’t need your plans. We’re doing just fine without you.” And with this, the man gets together with others, who form a picket line and go on strike against God’s plan – God’s offer of management for their lives.

If you’re wondering who’s on the picket line, Jesus tells us very clearly: it’s each one of us. Everywhere, God’s people have become sinful and self-serving. We all hold up our little signs which say...“I want it *my* way.” All we, like sheep, have gone astray.

The third message of the parable focuses on God’s final offer. After centuries of love and patience, God finally says, “I will send my son. Surely they will honour him.” So the son of God takes his place at the bargaining table of humanity. But still, the people want self-management. They say, “This is the boss’s son. If we destroy him, the world will be ours. We will be in charge.” So they did. In the language of the parable “they took him out of the vineyard and they killed him.” They took him to a garbage dump, a place called Golgotha. And they nailed him to the cross.

So where do we stand now, you and I? What have we done with Christ? Are we still on the picket line? Or do we pay lip service to the creed, whilst deep in our hearts we say, “I don’t really need you, stay out of my life”? Where do we stand? Perhaps we have already heard the offer but have rejected it, confusing the man on the cross with a philosophy of life, a particular denomination, or minister, or service club. But God’s final offer of a life that works does not come to us in the form of an organization, or a book of rules. It does not come to us as capitalism or socialism, as Catholicism, Presbyterianism or Anglicanism. God’s final and decisive offer to us is a person, the person of a man on the cross. A man that people put to death nearly two thousand years ago; a man that we, today, must either accept or reject, for there is no other choice.

The people who gathered on that dusty roadside have gone home now. Christ's body has been taken down from the cross. The show is over. Where do we stand, you and I?

*Lord Jesus, you don't make this easy! I really want to believe, to worship and to follow you – but the cost is high. And yet like Peter there are no options for me. "To whom shall I go – you do have the Word of Eternal Life!" Before your Cross, covered with the Blood of your love – I can only kneel and say "Yes!" My Lord and my God. Amen.*

## *Easter*

# IT'S YOUR MOVE!

John 20:11-13

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."*

A few days ago, I found myself standing in a candy store. For a few moments, I was completely fascinated by the enticing display of brightly coloured Easter eggs and chocolate bunnies that adorned the shelves. And I thought a little about the joy that Easter brings to our lives: as Winter's ice and snow begin to melt, so all around us the world is showing signs of new life. As Easter approaches, we feel a surge of excitement, for this is a time of new life, new promise and new hope. In fact, Easter and hope are totally inseparable and if there's one thing people need these days, it's hope.

Some years ago, I remember reading how a Chicago preacher received a letter from a member of his congregation which went something like this:

I am thirty-one. Divorced, though I fought the divorce bitterly. I feel badly because I have no hope for the future. I go home, even from church, and I cry. But there is no one to hold me when I cry. No one cares.

What hurts most is that I've asked God for grace to cope with living again, but I keep failing, and it doesn't work. I'm a basket case emotionally. Something is very wrong. I'm so crippled and embittered I can scarcely relate to people any more. I feel as if I will be sitting out the rest of my life in the penalty box.

...In the penalty box! There are a lot of us, I think, who know all about the penalty box. It's a place we have been sent for something we've done, or should have done. Perhaps we have made a bad marriage, or a bad career decision. Perhaps we feel it's too late to change anything. Perhaps we feel trapped in our fear and our loneliness, locked away in a kind of penalty box from which we long to escape. But no matter which way we look, we see nothing but hopelessness. We are trapped and there is nowhere to go.

The Easter story begins with a group of people feeling very much that way. The clock had run out for them. Their future had died on the cross two days before. All their hopes, their trust and their sense about what life meant had been crucified. And now it was all over. Huddled together in shame and fear, the disciples knew all about feeling helpless and hopeless. Without their Lord, they had nowhere to go. You see, the power of the Easter message is that it begins in the penalty box where a lot of us find ourselves living from time to time – locked into bad memories, locked into grief and sadness, helpless to make any moves. Well, Easter began there. But the miracle of Easter is that it doesn't leave us there.

The story of today's gospel is the story of life moving in on death; of hope moving in on despair; of people's lives being miraculously turned around, all because a woman said, "I have seen the Lord. He is not dead. He is alive."

In one of the great art galleries of Europe, there is a picture of Faust playing chess with the devil. They are playing for Faust's soul, and it appears that the devil has won. Faust is

checkmated. The face of the devil has a victorious glee to it. Faust, in great despair, feels lost. There is a story how people would come in their thousands to look at this painting. They would nod and say to each other, “Oh yes, that’s the way it is. That’s what life is like. Hopeless. We’re locked in. There’s nothing we can do about it. We’re all of us locked in the penalty box.” But the story goes on to relate how one day, one of the great chess masters of Europe came to the gallery and stood for hours, staring at the painting. Suddenly he let out a wild shout. “It’s a lie! It’s a lie!” he said excitedly. “Look, the king and the Knight still have moves left.”

I think, maybe, this is what Easter can be for us. We stand and look at our lives and our situation, believing that we are checkmated. That we have no moves left. And then, Jesus of Nazareth whom God raised up from the dead, comes to us and looks on our lives – the lives we have given up on – and says, “It’s a lie. You still have moves that you can make.”

Let’s go back to that first Easter morning, and to the disciples who, you remember, are locked up in a room in Jerusalem, afraid. Full of despair, they just didn’t know what to do next. They had no moves left and so, literally, they locked themselves in. After all, if Jesus was dead, then it was all over. The door on their future was firmly shut. Then, little by little the news begins to filter through. First, Mary Magdalene comes to them. Breathless, she pounds on the door, “I have seen the Lord,” she tells them. Not daring to believe her, the disciples lock the door again, their fear clouding everything else. But then, Jesus appears to Peter, and to two men on the road to Emmaus. More people who had no moves left are joined by this stranger on the road, who asks them what’s going on. They say, “How come you haven’t heard about Jesus of Nazareth? We had hoped...” What they were saying to the stranger was that they’d come to the end of the road. Nothing left. But the stranger speaks to them and says, in effect, “How dull you are. Sure, all this has happened,

I know about the penalty box too.” And then he opens the scriptures and he shows them what God’s moves for their lives are going to be. At the end of the day, Jesus breaks bread and gives it to them, and in that moment, in the breaking of the bread, they suddenly recognize who he is. And suddenly, everything is changed. Without even waiting for morning, they rush back to Jerusalem. The lock is off the door. They now have moves they can make.

I believe that what we have here is the best news that you and I could ever hear. It is that God, in raising Jesus Christ from the dead, has shown us we are not alone. No matter how hopeless our situation may seem. And that because Christ lives, we have some moves we still can make. To find out our first move, we need only look again at the Easter story. There we find each one of the disciples making one move in common. They moved to Jesus, to a relationship which was their future. And in that future, they were to discover a whole series of moves that would turn their entire world upside down. And ours too. For God, out of the great love he bears for us, brings us to life. A new life in Christ.

And so, on this Easter morning, we find that the door of the penalty box has been unlocked. And Christ is just on the other side of the door, saying to us, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If you will open the door and come to me, I will be with you forever.” Let our first move, like the disciples, be towards the risen Christ.

Our second move is to share our wonderful faith with an unbelieving world. To tell those who are still in the penalty box about Easter, about how it offers us hope and liberation. To reach out to others in love, and tell them what our church is all about – not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners where we learn to live together, to care for one another, to forgive one another. A place where God, out of the great love he bears for us, has brought us to freedom and new life with the risen Christ.

*Lord Jesus, in your victory over death you have forever unmasked the lie of the hopelessness of our lives and have revealed to us a new freedom and hope.*

*Grant that we, liberated from the penalty box of our sins and guilt, may find in you a new vision of what can be for our lives and our relationships and at the end, by your grace, receive everlasting life.*

*Through Jesus Christ.*

## IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE

John 20:24-25

*But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

One Good Friday afternoon after we had come home from church, my wife and I decided to go for a walk. As we were standing at one of the main intersections in North Toronto waiting for the light to turn green, three young men in their mid-teens came out of a milk store and stood behind us, chatting. "Where were you this morning?" one asked the other. "At church," his friend replied. There was a slight pause, then the first lad said, "Oh yeah, it's a special day, isn't it?" "Yes, it really is," came the answer. "So do you think that this Jesus Christ guy was really divine? Do you believe he's God?" the first young man persisted. There was another pause, a bit longer this time. And then the second boy replied in a fairly firm voice, "Yes, I do." "Oh, I have problems believing that," said his friend. "What's the point anyway?" Then the light changed to green and we crossed the road, so I never did hear how the conversation continued.

Every now and then, we all of us stop and think about these sort of things, and some of us actually talk to our friends about existential issues that are difficult to come to terms with.

“Where did I come from,” we wonder. And, “Where am I going? Do I matter to anyone?” we ask. But all too often these big questions go unanswered and we get discouraged. “What does it matter anyway,” we say to ourselves, and carry on with our day to day lives.

A few weeks ago, I was at a house where a group of people were discussing what had brought them to our church and why they had stayed. One young man in his early twenties told us that he had been coming for about three or four months because, although he had not been a church attender before, he had come to realize over the past couple of years that something was missing from his life. What this young man was really saying was, “I want to believe. I need to believe. But it’s very hard to find the right thing to believe in.”

In our gospel reading on this Sunday after Easter, we have the fascinating story of a man in his mid-twenties asking just this very kind of question. For this man, too, the issue is what he should believe in. It is the story of Thomas, and it takes place exactly a week after the resurrection of Jesus. And the word is out...Jesus is not dead, he is alive! Most of the disciples have already seen him, touched him, heard him speak. And they are all ecstatic with joy. All but Thomas. For Thomas, it is a real struggle to accept this staggering news. “In spite of what you tell me,” he says to the others, “unless I see Jesus, see the prints of the nails and the wound in his side, I will not believe this story.”

It seems that Thomas was a very practical young man, because this was not the first time he had found it hard to believe the things he could not find a rational explanation for. Looking back to Chapter 14 of John’s gospel, we read how Jesus was telling people about the glorious future that God has in store for them, and how he was going ahead to prepare a place for them. Suddenly Thomas interrupts, “Lord, if we don’t know where you’re going, how can we know which way to go?” he asks. Thomas speaks for a lot of us, especially per-

haps for those of us who are under thirty when he says, “Lord, I don’t know what to believe. How can I make up my mind?”

The first thing that I see in this story is that Thomas’ doubting and questioning arose from a fervent desire and deep need to believe. The need was so strong that he couldn’t just go away and forget all about Jesus. And I think this need is something you and I know all about, living as we do at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century. You see, the big question for today is why do we need faith at all? Going to church may be a good tradition to keep up, but beyond that it really is quite a meaningless activity. Then there are those who claim that science and technology are answering all our problems, that faith belongs only to the past and that the church is little other than a quaint museum of memories. Well, I don’t mind telling you that personally, I need more than that. The reason I need a religious faith is because despite scientific and technological progress, despite the sophistication of our modern world I know that the major questions of my life cannot be answered without bringing God into the picture. Sure, science can explain *how* things happen and *when* they happen. But I need to know *why* things happen, and *who* makes them happen. Have you ever found yourselves involved in a debate about the biblical account of Creation versus the scientific theory of how our world began? Well, it’s a pointless exercise because each discipline is approaching the question from different standpoints. Science concerns itself with the “How” and the “When.” Religion is concerned with the “Why” and the “Who.” “Why am I alive?” “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?” “Why is there an arms race?” “Why are my parents divorced?” “Why did my child die?” Science can’t begin to answer questions like these.

A short while ago, I was talking to a young woman in her late twenties who had just started to come to church. She had two university degrees, all kinds of job offers and, on the face of it, seemed to have a lot going for her. But deep down inside,

there was a restlessness and insecurity because the central questions of her life had not been answered. “What is life for?” she asked herself. And until that question was answered, life was not complete.

A survey was conducted in the United States recently which involved the Chief Executive Officers of major corporations and businesses throughout the country. When questioned about their religious affiliations, 60% of those that responded said that they had a deep personal faith and were involved with their church. These were intelligent, talented men and women who had attained a high degree of success in their working lives. Why, one might wonder, would so many of these high achievers hold on to their faith in God? May I suggest that people who reach this level of accomplishment need to know more than just “How” things work, or “When” they work. They need to know “Why” they work and “Who” makes them work. They understand that these are religious questions arising from the human quest for a reason and purpose to life.

The story of Thomas has a happy ending, for ultimately this cautious young man who wanted so much to believe, found the faith he needed. Despite all his doubts and questions, Thomas found his faith in a person. The person of Jesus Christ. It was eight days later and the disciples were all together, Thomas included. Suddenly, Jesus appears and goes up to the reluctant believer. “Thomas, reach out your hand and touch me,” he says. “Stop doubting and believe.”

Easter came a week late for Thomas, but it did come. Thomas falls to his knees. “My Lord and my God,” he says. And so Thomas the Doubter becomes Thomas the Believer – not because all his questions were answered, for he still had to work out some of the “Hows” and the “Wheres” and the “Whats” himself. But faith had put these questions into perspective. And faith came as a result of meeting the person who is at the centre of it all, Jesus Christ. And so it is for us too.

Christian faith is essentially a question of knowing the person of Jesus, experiencing in him a God who loves us, who accepts us as we are, who tells us that we matter, that our life has value and that we have a future. A purpose for living. For we are the children of God and heirs to his everlasting kingdom.

Just one other point: did you notice where Thomas found his faith? He found it in church. “The disciples gathered and Thomas was there.” Too often, people who are full of doubt feel a little uncomfortable going to church. They look around them at all the people who seem to have no difficulty believing, and feel that they don’t quite measure up. And so they decide to stay away for a while until they can sort things out. Thomas didn’t do that. Thomas had problems, but he stayed with the disciples. He stayed with the church. And in that church, he found his faith.

*Father, thank you for a mind to think and to ask questions. Thank you for your patience in my search for truth – a search that brings me to yourself. Thank you for granting me the dignity, the right, the great privilege of saying yes to your love.*

*When it is not easy to believe – remind me that I am never forgotten, never abandoned, always forgiven, always loved.*

*In Christ, Amen.*

## HOW ARE YOU FIXED FOR FRIENDS?

John 14:15-17

*"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."*

A number of years ago, my son and I watched a movie together – a rare occasion! The film we saw was *Gardens of Stone* and I found it very moving. A tearjerker, in fact! Set in the late sixties and early seventies, it was about a detachment of American soldiers at Arlington Cemetery, Virginia. Day after day, month after month, these men would form the guard of honour for fellow servicemen killed in Vietnam. The movie deals with some of their feelings of helplessness and frustration, but really it is a story about the profound value of friendship, about how our lives are enriched by it and about the deep pain we feel if we lose a friend. Certainly friendship is a rich human experience, but living as I do in downtown Toronto, I am increasingly aware of the loneliness and human isolation that one finds in a big city. I find it deeply distressing that there are so many people who come into my office, feeling quite desperately alone. They sit down and chat for a while, then they look at me and say, "All I need is a friend, you see Rector. All I need is a friend."

Mother Teresa of Calcutta has written that the most widespread disease in the world today is not leprosy or cancer or heart disease. It's the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, deserted, alone. Her words came back to me when I was looking at today's scripture reading which is about relationships. I thought of all the lonely people in the world, all the lonely people right here in our city, and I realized that friendship is not something we should take for granted, but something we should preserve and nurture and cherish. And so, today I want to ask you quite frankly, how are you fixed for friends?

The point where we pick up John's gospel story is when Jesus is preparing his disciples for the fact that he would be leaving them. The disciples must have felt a great deal of sadness at this news. They had been with Jesus for almost three years and, in that time, some very close relationships had been established. But now, their master was telling them they would soon be on their own, and they really couldn't cope with that.

There were a lot of things that Jesus might have said to the disciples about his impending departure. He could have taken the attitude that they'd known him for three whole years and should be grateful for that. Or he might have told them to go and find someone else to follow. Or he might simply have left without saying anything. But he did none of these things. Instead, Jesus made the forlorn disciples a promise. "I will ask the father, and he will give you another friend to be with you forever." Now the word "friend" is translated from the Greek "parakletos," which literally means "one who comes and stands with you," so Christ's promise is not of something vague up there in the clouds, or something locked up in a church. God's promise is that Someone, a friend, will come and stand with us and live with us. For always. And then he goes on to speak about the quality, the depth and the effectiveness of this new friendship. According to our text, there are three things that we can count on. First, that we will never be

left alone. Second, that our lives will be sustained by his living presence within us. And third, that if we listen to his voice, we will be loved by God. Forever.

How are we fixed for friends, you and I? Friends we can really count on forever? I remember a young man telling me about his father, a very successful businessman who had died. The son was grieving for him. He told me one of the things which was making him particularly sad. He said, “Dad had a Christmas Card list of seven hundred, but not one close friend.” When Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to be our close friend for ever, he was well aware of how many of us are desperately afraid to make close personal relationships. Afraid to commit ourselves, afraid to make ourselves vulnerable – fears that are realized when a friendship is severed, whether by neglect or separation, by death or by divorce.

Just a few months ago, a man was talking to me about how his marriage of some thirty years had just ended. As he told the story of his pain, of how he was trying to pick up the broken pieces of his life and shape a new future for himself, he admitted that the one thing he’d feared all his life had happened. It was the fear of being alone. The fear of life dying within him. The fear of not being loveable to anyone ever again. It was these very fears that Jesus was addressing when he promised his disciples that he would never leave them alone. That although they felt they’d die a little when Jesus left, yet this feeling would be eclipsed by a new quality of life. For he was sending them a ‘God-presence’ which the world could not see and would not know. “But you will know him,” Christ assures them, “For he will live with you and in you.”

As we listen to Christ’s words today, those of us who are lonely, those of us who are bereaved, those of us who stand alone with the shattered pieces of our broken dreams can take heart. For we are not alone after all. As members of the human race, as those who reach out to God in faith, we have his promise. Abraham heard the promise. Moses heard it too.

Joshua heard it and so did Caleb. Ruth and David and Solomon heard it. So did Job and the prophets on into the New Testament – St. John, St. Paul, St. Peter, all the apostles. It was the promise that gave them strength, that sustained them and motivated them to go out into the world and do great things for God. Now, in John’s gospel we find that this same promise has become ours too.

The second thing we can count on is God’s promise, “Because I live, you too will live.” The feeling of bereavement we suffer at the death of a relationship that mattered to us, will be eclipsed by a new quality of life that is God’s to give. “I am come,” Jesus said, “That you may have life and have it more abundantly.” And he means that.

There was a third promise. “You will be loved of my father and I too will love you.” How comforting it is to know that even when we are broken, God views every piece as loveable, valuable and worthy of his attention. Now, Jesus knew that all of us need someone we can count on as a friend. He knew too, that life can be desolate indeed without friends who encourage us, support us, sustain us. He knew that his disciples would have each other after he had left them. He knew they would comfort one another, support one another. But he knew too that they needed more than that. He knew they would need a different kind of friendship if they were to stand together and spread their news throughout the world. He knew that they needed the sort of relationship that would generate a joy that no one could ever take away from them. A relationship that would fill them with a peace that passes all human understanding, a love that would enfold them and empower them. A love that would never fail.

How are you fixed for friends? How are you fixed for the sort of friend who gives us his promise, “I will not leave you alone. Because I live, you will live. You will be loved of my father and I will love you too.” How are you fixed for a friend like this?

*God my Father, I do not do well alone! Without the touch of friends, I am restless and there is no life in me. I long to be known and to belong.*

*Grant that your Spirit may so enrich my life; embracing my fearfulness with his intimacy, meeting my helplessness with his strength that I may never feel abandoned or forgotten – but always forgiven and always loved.*

*Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

## THE LITTLE CHURCH THAT GREW

Acts 1:6-8

*So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

One Sunday afternoon some time ago, I was sitting down at home looking for some good golf to watch on television. As I was changing channels, I came across an interview with two preachers from Vancouver who were discussing what makes for a powerful and successful church. One of the Clergymen, a Canon Michael Green, started to talk about an Anglican church in Oxford, England, where he had been Rector up until a few years ago. He described that church as something alive and exciting, jammed to the sidewalk twice a day. And as he spoke, I found myself listening intently. "What makes for a church with that kind of energy?" I wondered. You see, in spite of all the statistics that seem to indicate church attendance is dropping, I also sense a strong desire on the part of many Christian people these days to build a powerful church in our time, a church that is vital and dynamic. A church that

is a positive influence for good in our confusing world. A church where people find good news, where they want to bring their friends. A church where people long to be involved and line up to be committed.

Well, such was the dream of eleven men six weeks after the first Easter. Ever since they had seen the risen Jesus, the disciples had known that before long their master would be leaving them. They realized that it was necessary for him to go away. They understood that what they had experienced so far was just the beginning, for they knew that Christ would send them a friend, the Holy Spirit, and that together, they would lay the foundations for a great and powerful church that would be God's agency of salvation for the world.

Well, I'm sure that all of this must have boggled their minds! Jesus had these great ideas, but how could a handful of fishermen and a few publicans ever make them happen? How could they ever begin to build such a church? Well, in the first chapter of Acts, we can read for ourselves just how they managed to do this. How they succeeded in building a church that grew from eleven ordinary men to five thousand people in just three weeks. A remarkable growth by any standards, and in a society that had none of our modern methods of communication, it was quite extraordinary. What kind of strategies did they use, one wonders. And what lessons can we learn from them that will help us build the sort of church we need today?

It's interesting to see that the first thing the disciples learned by way of strategy, was how not to do it! They held a meeting and decided they would go to Jesus with a suggestion, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" After all, this was a man who had fed five thousand people, who had raised Lazarus from the dead, healed ten lepers, had died on the cross and had been raised to life again. Surely the restoration of Israel's power would be a "cinch" for their remarkable master! And how wonderful to go back to "the good old days" – to the days of Solomon and David, when Israel was in its heyday.

Well, I think that most of us today can really relate to feelings of nostalgia. Politicians talk about going back to traditional values. Some educators talk about going back to basics. Walking through antique stores, looking at marvellous old pieces of furniture, we often ask, “Why can’t they make it like that today?” So often we find ourselves longing to go back to gentler times, when society seemed to be more ordered and predictable. Some of us can have these feelings in the church, nostalgia for former days where the churches were fuller and there was a healthy respect for holy things. Where you knew all the hymns and there was no question which prayer book you would find in the pew! Clearly, having feelings of nostalgia is part of being human. You may remember in the Easter story how Mary Magdalene, recognizing Jesus in the garden of the tomb, wanted to take hold of him. But Jesus told her, “Touch me not.” You see, Mary’s very natural, human gesture was something that was part of the past. What she was saying was, “Lord, let it be the way it used to be. Comfortable, predictable. Sitting at your feet, listening to every word. Hearing all those marvellous stories again.” But Jesus says to her, “No, Mary. We cannot go back. Instead, go forward.” And this is just what the disciples, six weeks later are trying to do. “Lord, let’s go back,” they plead. “Will you restore...?” And again, Jesus replies by saying, “No. It is not for you to know God’s timing, but you shall receive power. You shall be my witnesses.” And just as he had said to Mary, “No, Mary. We can’t go back,” he tells Peter and the others, “No, there will be no restoration program here. The direction for building the kingdom of God is not backwards into the past, it’s forward into the future. As a matter of fact,” he might have said, “what lies ahead is bigger and better and more exciting than you can even imagine. The best is yet to come! You will receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses.”

And so, from the start, the disciples learn that the correct strategy for building a great church begins by looking in the

right direction, expecting God to do something brand new. It is interesting, isn't it, that the building of the church did not rest entirely on the ability of the disciples – although, between them, they had many talents and skills – but on the ability of God to create new and better things. Jesus said, “I will send you a comforter, and he will be with you forever. And because of him, you will be my witnesses, here, there, and everywhere.” Jesus was talking about big business. He was talking about a global enterprise. And the means to make it happen would be the power of the Holy Spirit of the living God. And, you see, we don't find that kind of power by looking back, but only by embracing the future in faith.

What did the first group of men and women do to prepare themselves for the power that was to come? Luke records that they did two things. First, they gathered together. And second, they devoted themselves to prayer.

One of the significant new directions in churches these days is the formation of small groups within a parish. There are small Bible Study groups, small discussion groups, small prayer groups – six to twelve persons – meeting usually in private homes around the Word. Every growing church in this country has seen this kind of informal gathering, and through it has found a new experience of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church.

The second thing the apostles did was to devote themselves to prayer. It had to be prayer that was fairly general, because they didn't really know what they were praying for. But they prayed that they might be open and available to God for him to do what he wanted in their lives. And we must remember today that nothing much happens in the church that is of any value or permanence, that isn't initiated or underwritten by the prayer of all concerned.

Building a powerful church by looking in the right direction – ahead, not back. Hearing God's promise of his Holy Spirit, “You will receive power and you will be my witness-

es.” Preparing for this to happen. The power of the small gathering. The power of prayer. These were the strategies with which a handful of committed men laid the foundations of the church we belong to today. As we commemorate the glorious Ascension of Christ into heaven, we might ponder these things and ask ourselves, “Is our Church a dynamic force in spreading Christ’s love throughout the world? Do we stand together as a forum of caring amidst a society in crisis? For this is our divine mandate, and one which we must approach with energy, commitment and trust. Because the best is yet to come.”

*Heavenly Father, you have drawn your people into one Body to be your Church.*

*You have called us to be your witnesses and empowered us by your Holy Spirit.*

*Grant us a new vision to be your people. Save us from the sin of always looking back and grant us courage and faith to see your great plan for us tomorrow. Give us grace to risk new challenges, to trust in your power and to build a church that will praise your Holy Name.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## *Pentecost*

# THE POWER WITHIN

Acts 2:1-4

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

A number of years ago, I was attending a conference on religious education in Cincinnati, Ohio. I arrived in time for lunch on the first day, so I went through the self-serve line in the cafeteria, and took my tray to a table where two elderly women were already seated. After exchanging a few pleasantries, one of the women leaned across the table and said, "Have you heard about the Holy Spirit?" Well, I don't mind telling you that I was a little taken aback by this question and didn't know quite what to say! While I was searching for a reply, my lunch companion went on to tell me that she and her friend were members of a religious order, and that their experience of God had profoundly changed their lives. One of them said, "I've been going to church for almost fifty years, but up until last year, I had never known the closeness, the energy and the excitement of God." With tears in her eyes, she said, "It's the Holy Spirit, you know."

In the Acts of the Apostles chapter 2, we have the record of God fulfilling his promise to "pour out his spirit upon all

flesh.” Jesus had told his disciples that he would have to leave them, but that in a very short time he would send them a friend, a comforter, to be with them for ever. And, God kept his promise. When the Holy Spirit came to the apostles in Jerusalem, they too experienced the closeness of God, a closeness which wrapped them in a kind of warmth and drew them together into a new depth of relationship. They too, felt a new energy, an energy which enabled them to do things they had thought impossible before. And they too, knew a new excitement, the excitement of being alive. An excitement about what the future would hold for them.

In the life of any volunteer organization (and the church is no exception), there are times when everything seems to go well; when the budget is met, the Board is happy and the work goes on. But, as we all know, there are other times when we find ourselves at the low end of the cycle. These are times when it’s hard to balance the budget, hard to keep up a high level of enthusiasm, and hard to find the right kind of leadership. At times like these, we feel as if we’re holding up the world all by ourselves. We feel very much alone and drained of energy. I expect you know the feeling.

The story is told of a minister in charge of a small town parish. Every day at about noon he would be seen driving away from town, heading north. This so aroused the curiosity of one of the church elders that one day, he decided to follow him and find out where his pastor went. He watched the car as it travelled about half a mile out of town to where some railway tracks ran close to the road. Pulling off onto a side road, the minister stopped the car, got out, leaned against the hood and waited. Pretty soon a train appeared in the distance. Dragging its load uphill, the caboose gradually lost speed as it passed the spot where the minister’s car stood. Eventually, after several minutes had gone by, the train disappeared into the distance. The minister got back into his car and returned home. Well, the elder was mystified. For a while he said noth-

ing about the incident, but then his curiosity got the better of him. Finding the pastor alone one day, he went up to him and asked why in the world he did this every day. The minister looked at him rather sheepishly. “Well,” he said with a smile. “I go up there every day just to see something move uphill that I don’t have to push!”

I believe that the message of Pentecost, the message of the coming of the Holy Spirit offers a strong word of encouragement to all of us who feel we are pushing to get things done entirely on our own. Because, in fact, the Spirit of God is within us and we are not really on our own at all. He it is who can fill us with a new strength, a new vitality. He it is who excites us and inspires us to act with enthusiasm and with joy. As we read about that day of Pentecost, we can picture the disciples experiencing a God who was lifting them up, replacing their fear with confidence, their feelings of inadequacy with a new enabling power. And during the months that followed, that enabling power was to fill them with the desire to reach out and bring compassion and healing and good news to all the hurting people around them.

We hear a lot of talk nowadays about burnout. We in the church are not exempt from it. We work and we push, and we find ourselves feeling tired and frazzled, tempted to “cop out.” We believe that we are at the end of our rope. I want to tell you that when this happens to me, it’s usually the result of two things: number one, taking myself too seriously; and number two, not taking God’s Holy Spirit seriously enough. We need to know that every good work, every act of mercy and compassion, every word of encouragement and love are things underwritten by the power of God. And we also need to realize that we are completely incapable of sustaining these things over the long haul without asking for, and depending upon the life-giving breath of God. We need to pray daily – in the words of the great hymn – “Breathe on me, breath of God. Fill me with life anew.” For the Holy Spirit is God’s enabling power

which makes it possible for ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

And there's something else that the Holy Spirit does for us. As I was told at that Conference in Cincinnati: "He fills us with energy and excitement." We sense some of that excitement in our Scripture reading today. So much so, that at nine o'clock in the morning the crowd in Jerusalem were accusing the disciples of being drunk! Drunk with excitement and joy. Energized by the Holy Spirit. Now, I'm not sure that we need to roll in the aisles every Sunday! But we do need to be joyful about our faith.

I remember celebrating an early Holy Communion service some years ago. One of the parishioners had brought her young grandson to church, a little boy of about four years old. Suddenly, at a very hushed moment in the service, his clear little voice piped up loud and clear, "Granny, why is everyone so sad?" Well, perhaps we can all afford to think about that remark because, you see, I believe that one of the works of the Holy Spirit in our time is to bring a new joy to his church. To bring new fire to his people and a new energy that enables us to be his witnesses. To do our work with faithfulness, with courage...and with excitement. To bring us that joy which springs from a pure love of God. A joy that no one can take away from us.

*Heavenly Father, we praise you for the enabling power of your Holy Spirit. We thank you that in our many times of discouragement and disappointment, we have your promise of a Friend who comes and stands with us – bringing us a fresh closeness, energy and excitement in our relationship with you.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## A GOD FOR MONDAY MORNING

Exodus 32:1

*When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."*

Some years ago, in an early morning Bible Study with a group of about twelve business and professional men, we were talking about the Christian faith and the effect it has on our work and our home life. As we discussed how God works to sustain and direct a person's life between Sundays, one of the members of the group began to look more and more uncomfortable. Eventually, he spoke up. "I really have problems with this," he said. "Somehow, I'm very comfortable with God on a Sunday morning. I feel strong in my faith. I can sing. I can listen and pray. On Sunday, it all seems to fit together. But then comes Monday. Boy, what I need is a God for Monday morning!"

Often, when I'm talking to people, we get onto the subject of church and what it has to offer them. Over and over again, I hear people say that if faith is really going to work, it has to be something that speaks to them of a God who is a prime source of strength in their lives. It has to be something that speaks to them of a God who sustains, encourages, leads and heals, not just in the glory and majesty of a Sunday morn-

ing, but on a Monday morning too, and for a whole week. Every week.

Looking at today's scripture reading, these conversations take on a new significance, for here in Exodus, Chapter 2, we read about an earlier congregation who wanted just the same thing. They wanted a God to go before them all the time. To stay with them and sustain them every day of their lives. You may remember what was happening here. Moses had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, across the Red Sea to the foot of Mount Sinai. Here, they had their first worship experience standing in the presence of an awesome and holy God, a God who came to them with some drama – with thundercloud and trumpet call. And in that experience they had felt strong. They had felt the powerful sense of God's presence around them. But now, six weeks had passed and the trumpet was quiet. Moses was up on the mountain recording the ten commandments, and an uneasiness descended on the camp. For the Israelites, the memory of that glorious "Sunday morning" was fading, and they were looking for a God who would take charge again. They were looking for a God for Monday morning.

So, you see, we have a lot in common, those ancient Israelites and we Twenty-First Century Christians. Recognizing a deep inner need for strength and a meaning to life, they were simply saying, "We need a God who will go before us. A God who will go to work with us. A God who will make sense of our lives. A God who will be with us at school to sustain us in our studies and lead us toward a secure future. A God who is present when everyone else leaves us. A God who comforts and consoles us when we are all alone. A God for Monday morning."

And so the people of Israel set to work. Gathering together their best artists and designers, they chose a symbol that everyone could relate to – a symbol of strength. The symbol of a young bull. Collecting their most valuable possessions, gold and precious stones, they fashioned them into a beautiful,

gleaming statue and said, “This is our God. This is the God who brought us out of Egypt and who will go before us into our new future.” You see, every one of us has a God for Monday morning. The issue is, is he the right one? Is he a God who we put together out of the best that we have? Or is he a God who puts us together with the best that he has?

Well, the Israelites were delighted with their golden calf – it was beautifully designed, skillfully crafted and could be easily transported as they travelled towards the Promised Land. It was just exactly what they wanted. Or was it?

I want to tell you the problem with the golden calf. First, it’s too small. Every human life on this planet is of infinitely higher value and worth than any technology or business system, or intellectual elite, or military arsenal. Or any golden calf that our culture can create. And another thing: in order to worship such a god, one must look downward and inward, rather than upward and outward. In Psalm 135, we read these marvellous words: “The idols of the nations are silver and gold laid by the hands of men. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all that trust in them.” In other words, we become that what we worship. Whatever we allow to run our lives ultimately takes over. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who we hear and feel in church, is a God who lifts people up and energizes them, encourages and empowers them. In Isaiah, Chapter 40 we read, “Those who wait upon the Lord (on Monday morning), will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.” That is a God for Monday morning. He is the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity.

There is a second problem with the golden calf. He never says anything other than what we want to hear. He’s like a computer; you get out what you put in. And that makes this god very safe. He doesn’t bother you. There is no conscience problem. He will never correct you. Therefore, he will never

tell you to change. As we read of idols in Psalm 135, “They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes but they cannot see, ears but they cannot hear.”

I had a friend once who, every January would say the same thing. “I’m saying goodbye, Bill,” he would announce cheerfully. “Every Sunday at 11 o’clock for the next three months I’ll be skiing up on Blue Mountain. I will worship God there in the beauty and majesty of nature.” I found myself asking him if that God on Blue Mountain ever speaks to him. “Does he tell you to love your neighbour when it’s hard to love your neighbour?” I asked. Does he tell you that lying, cheating and stealing are wrong? Is he a God who says quite clearly, “Thou shalt not commit adultery...thou shalt not covet that which belongs to someone else”?

It is recorded that after the people of Israel worshipped the golden calf, “they rose up to play and made revelry.” I’m not sure what “revelry” was, but I’m sure it was a little more than your average coffee hour after church! In other words, the Israelites had made a god who allowed them to do exactly what they wanted, to say what they wanted, to hurt whoever they wanted. And there was no one there to punish them. No one to say, “Friend, this is dead-end living. There is a better way.”

I believe that in this story of the Golden Calf there are some very disturbing questions for each one of us. You see, we have to ask ourselves just who our “God for a Monday morning” really is. Could he be a god that we have put together out of our own needs? A god created in our own image with a little organ music and a Prayer Book thrown in? Or is he the God who has said, “I have loved you with an everlasting love and I will forgive your sin and your guilt, and I will blot them out forever”? Is he the God who meets us in his word and feeds us with bread and wine? Is he the God who speaks to us of justice and forgiveness, of peace and of love? Because this is the God we need. This is the God that will truly go before us. A God for Monday morning. A God for every day of our lives.

*God our Father, it is so easy to recognize you and to feel your presence on Sunday morning. Through music and the spoken word, you feed me and lift me up.*

*But now it's Monday, Lord, and as I go to work, I need you to go before me; as I deal with people, I need you standing with me; as I make hard decisions, I need your wisdom.*

*Grant me courage to recognize you in people I work with and situations that occur; to see your hand leading me into opportunities of giving and caring.*

*Forgive me when I limit you to the expected and status quo and fail to recognize you as alive and triumphant in all things – on Monday morning.*

*In Christ, Amen.*

## THE NARROW DOOR

Luke 13:23-24

*Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.*

In Luke's gospel we read a lot about the cost of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. At the same time, there is always the underlying promise of great riches which the believer has by faith. And it is very plain that what God wants for you and for me is "fullness of life." As Jesus said, "I am come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly." What the abundant Christian life involves is a freedom from guilt; a strength to cope with all one's problems; a deep sense of direction and purpose and a sensitivity to the needs of others. This is the kind of life Christ has made available for us, and it flows from a renewed sense of self-worth, a confidence in God and his plan for our lives. As Christians, of course, we believe that God's plan for us does not end when we die. On the contrary. It only really begins. The Christian life, then, involves a belief in the resurrection. A belief that we have life, have it abundantly, have it eternally.

Today's reading addresses the question of who qualifies for citizenship in God's kingdom. One of the people who were listening to Jesus as he passed through the countryside teaching, asked how many would be saved. Jesus tells him not to worry about statistics, just to make sure that he is among those

who make it. “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door,” Christ says to the man. “For many will seek to enter and will not be able.”

Then Jesus goes on to paint the picture of a group of very disappointed people – religious people, churchmen who, on the last day of their lives find the door to eternal life closed. For me, these are some of the most frightening words of scripture: “I don’t know you or where you came from.” Imagine the disappointment of thinking you belonged, of thinking that eternal life was something automatic, of believing that you had been in the centre of religious activity and close to religious people, and that your place in God’s kingdom was already reserved...only to find that you were mistaken. You had not done enough. These disappointed people protested vigorously. “But hey, wait a minute,” they said. “We ate with you and drank with you. You taught in our streets. You must remember!” But their protests were in vain. What they were describing was a kind of nodding acquaintance, the sort of relationship which is characterized by coolness, objectivity, distance. They had heard what Christ was saying, but they wanted to distance themselves from his word. They wanted to keep an open mind. And Jesus says to them, “I never knew you.”

That’s hard to hear. It raises a couple of questions that bother me from time to time. Maybe they’re questions that bother you too. You see, although I appreciate the wonderful richness of God’s grace, and although I want this very much in my life, I look at this text and ask, “How hard do I need to try?” Christ has said we must strive to enter through the narrow door. I wonder a lot what he means by “narrow.” “Can a ‘broad-minded’ Anglican fit through this narrow door?” I ask myself. “How hard should I try?”

We have all heard those who tell us that the committed Christian should have a daily quiet time, should set aside time for prayer and meditation. Some suggest that we should enroll in courses to deepen our faith, that we should go to church

more often. We may listen to them and think, “But surely I do enough. After all, religion isn’t all there is to life!” But then we read this gospel story, and we think again. For here we see another group of people who thought they did enough...“We ate and drank with you”...but Jesus doesn’t agree. “I don’t know you,” he says.

And so how much is “enough?” I think the answer to that question lies in a single word which you will find in verse 25. It is “strive.” “Strive to enter in,” says Jesus. Try your very hardest. Do your very best. In Greek, the word is *agonizo*. If needs be, we should agonize over the things of God.

A number of years ago, Jack Lemmon starred in the movie *Tribute*. It was the story of an actor who had gone through a bout of cancer, but had been cured. His friends get together and give him a tribute dinner. They get him up on the stage and say a lot of kind things about him. He has a great time! And then he responds. He says to them, “What I want for you is that you do everything with passion. That your work, your play, your relationships with people, with your family...that all is done with passion.” And then he adds, “By passion, I mean ‘love that goes the distance.’ “It seems to me that this particularly applies to the Christian life. If we desire an effective faith, a faith that meets the real needs of our lives, a faith that pleases God, we must have a passion for the things of God. This does not mean we have to be perfect. We can’t be. It just means that we must strive to grow. Strive with a passion.

And then there is my second question: “Can a ‘broad-minded’ Anglican enter in at the narrow door?” When I think of “narrow” in a religious context, I think of something which is one-sided, biased, closed, negative. Yet I live in a society that likes to keep its options open, to hang loose, to be broad-minded, to avoid – if possible – serious commitment. The words we are very fond of these days are “inclusive,” “open,” “relevant,” “accommodating,” “understanding.” But this door, we are told, is narrow. How then may I pass through?

Daniel Yankelovitch, an American sociologist, in his book *New Rules* gives a marvellous analysis of the cultural and economic forces shaping our future. He is especially concerned about how a person succeeds in finding true fulfillment in a world turned upside down. How a person can enter into a truly satisfying life. His conclusion is the title of his last chapter which is called “Towards an Ethic of Commitment.” He writes:

We do not find ourselves by concentrating day and night on “my” feelings, “my” potential, “my” needs, wants and desires. By doing that, we do not become freer, more spontaneous, more creative persons. Instead we become smaller, more self-centred, more isolated. We do not grow. We shrink. Self-fulfillment comes only through commitment – a losing of oneself in order to find oneself. And somehow, keeping an open mind and waiting to be totally convinced doesn’t really produce a lifestyle or a faith that is truly satisfying.

I believe that this insight throws light on the narrow door that Christ is telling us about. I believe we have to make a choice about who our God is. Because our faith can only come alive and make any real difference to our lives if we choose to enter through that narrow door of commitment. If you and I want to find a faith that is fulfilling, that speaks to the real needs of our lives, we are called upon to strive. We must strive to grow. Strive to have a passion for the things of God. Strive for the courage to make a choice about who our God really is. And what he is not. We must strive unceasingly for commitment, so that we may enter into the kingdom of God. . . through the narrow door.

*Lord, I've been taking a lot for granted this day  
and in the pressure I've let a lot of good things slide.  
I've missed reading your Word – too busy to pray –  
and in all that, I've missed you! Give me today new  
grace to strive to serve you; a new love for you that  
“goes the distance” as your love and forgiveness has  
done for me. Amen.*

## THE RIGHT CROWD

Luke 7:11-13

*Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep."*

Some time ago, a couple came to see me who needed to talk to someone. They were very upset and concerned. The problem was their son, now in his twenties. He had left school early but wasn't making any attempt to find a job. He was sleeping all day, partying all night, and now he was facing a court appearance for drunk driving. In spite of their great disappointment, both parents still very much cared for the boy. Like many other couples in a similar position, they blamed themselves bitterly for their son's behaviour. "Where have we gone wrong?" his mother asked me tearfully. "We gave him everything we could. He was always such a good boy. But he got into the wrong crowd."

Today, I would like to think a little about living with the "right crowd" and of the necessity for every one of us to make a choice as to what sort of crowd we want to live in. You see, Luke's gospel story focuses on two different crowds of people, the one which had gathered around Jesus as he was about to enter the city of Nain, and the other a funeral procession –

people who were surrounding a woman whose only son had just died.

Two crowds of people, both charged with emotion, both drawn together by an overwhelming fascination for something unusual. The funeral procession was a crowd of, say, fifty to a hundred people who were united by a spirit of despair and hopelessness, shattered dreams and personal tragedy. As they moved towards the cemetery mourning the death of a young man who was, perhaps, about eighteen years old, the people walked sadly alongside the grieving mother. It was death that had drawn this crowd together.

You and I live in a society that is very much preoccupied with the whole subject of death and dying. We see it reported on the front pages of our newspapers. We see it in films dealing with the occult and the weird and the obscene – macabre stories of people whose lives have been distorted with fear. We see it on our television screens – shooting, mugging and violence. Death is something which holds a profound fascination for us, whether it's the death of people, or the death of marriages, of human dignity, or moral values.

A number of weeks ago, there was a short report in the press about the results of a play writing competition for young people across Canada. Reading through the submissions from some very talented and creative young people, one thing particularly alarmed the judges. It concerned the predominant theme which many of these young playwrights had chosen to write about. It was suicide. Now, I read about this with some concern, but reflecting on it, I began to realize that it's only a symptom of the crowd that so many people live in today. It is a crowd whose lifestyle is characterized by a lack of purpose. It breeds bitterness, anger and disappointment.

But for many, that's the way life is. A hopeless maze of superficial shallow relationships, an empty existence of pessimism and despair. These are people who are going nowhere.

I believe that for many of the people in the funeral crowd, pessimism and despair were the predominant emotions as they identified with the heartbroken mother and her grief. But this is the story of two crowds. As the funeral procession leaves the city, another crowd is approaching from the opposite direction. This crowd is very different. It surrounds a man from Nazareth. As we read Luke's account of this event in the New Testament, we don't need too much imagination to visualize the mood and the spirit of these people. The previous day, they had witnessed the miracle of healing in Capernaum. And now, they were following this man, Jesus, drawn to him because they found hope in witnessing the things he did, and saw a new future for their lives in listening to the things he said. He offered them hope. He offered them a vision of human potential that was brand new. For here was God walking on the earth, turning it from sand and rock, from weakness and insecurity to something solid and secure. It was a crowd who believed in life – people going someplace. People with a friend.

And then these two crowds meet. These two congregations of human persons – one preoccupied by the spirit of death, the other by the spirit of life. Seeing the widow's tears, Jesus is filled with compassion. He goes up to her. "Weep no more," he tells her gently. Then he goes up to the bier and puts his hand on it. "Young man," he says, "I say to you, get up." And with these words, the crowd of mourners perceive that life flows from a relationship with Jesus Christ. Life, which is stronger than death.

Now, I believe we may extract three things from this story. The first thing involves a choice that we must make. The second thing concerns our agenda as a church. And the third thing is about what we may expect when we are living in the right crowd.

You see, for us, making a choice is inevitable. Which crowd do we want to be in? We need to ask that both of our-

selves as individuals and collectively, as a Church. Is our life centred in forces that pull us down, rather than lift us up? For instance, is the week ahead likely to be coloured by a sense of futility, of negativity? A feeling that there is nothing to look forward to? Or will it be filled with trust and joy, and ‘that peace which passes all understanding’? Which crowd are you going to choose? Some of us may feel that we are victims in a world that has relegated us involuntarily to the wrong crowd. But so often, our situation is the result of bad decisions we have made along the way. Choices that opted for death rather than life.

There’s another question which the church must ask itself. Are we hidebound by convention and resistant to change? Or are we open and receptive to the liberating spirit of God – a God who has incredible surprises in store for all those who are in his crowd? In the context of today’s gospel story, these questions are particularly relevant because if we study the passage carefully, we find it gives us a picture of what the church should be in the world... a community of people sharing a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ. Every time we say a prayer for someone in need, everything we give ourselves sacrificially in service, we are releasing that life energy which comes from God’s Holy Spirit. Every time we meet anger with love, every time we offer a lonely person a few minutes of our time, every time we see hurt in someone’s eyes and just listen and understand... we are being part of that Christ-centred crowd that we call the church.

Finally, a word about what we may expect when we are in the right crowd. What happens to me if I choose a Christ-centred crowd over anything else?

Some years ago, I was in Windsor, Ontario, at a conference on counselling. The leader of the workshop I was attending was a Roman Catholic priest from Chicago. One afternoon shortly after lunch when everyone was feeling a little sleepy, he began to talk about two forces: life that lifts us up, and

death-like gravity that pulls us down. While he was speaking, he casually picked up a chair that was on the stage. We paid little attention. But suddenly, in mid-sentence, he let the chair drop to the floor with a loud clatter, and everybody woke up very abruptly! He said to us, “Did you see what was happening?” We looked at him, not understanding. “I didn’t push that chair down, I just let it go,” he told us. “Gravity took over. I couldn’t hold it up any more.” He went on to say that this is how life is. We try to hold it up all on our own, and it falls. So what are we to do? While we were thinking about this, the workshop leader picked up the chair again. Just then, a Sister in the front row ran up and supported his arm. “Now,” he said, “that’s what we need. A helping hand. We can’t hold life up on our own. We need Someone to help us. And then, we find we can.” That Someone is Jesus Christ, and when we are in his crowd we don’t have to hold up life all on our own. We don’t have to manage our jobs or our marriages or our loneliness all by ourselves any more. He is there to help us.

Two crowds. And we have a choice, you and I. A choice between a life that is characterized by negativity and hopelessness and a life with richness and depth. A life in Christ. Life that gives us a reason to wake up tomorrow morning and go on. Two crowds. Which one are you in?

*Lord Jesus, I move in many crowds. Often my days are clouded with pessimism and complaint. I look for a smile and I see a stare; I look for a friend and I find only strangers.*

*Grant me grace, O Lord, to recognize you in the crowd, so that sustained by your love and joy, I may be an instrument of your peace – bring hope and encouragement to those around me.*

*For your name’s sake. Amen.*

## IN HIM I WIN

Romans 7:14-15

*For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*

A few summers ago, I remember driving past a church in a small, rural community. The sermon title for the following Sunday was posted outside on the lawn. There it was, in big bold letters for all to see...“The Sins of Summer”! Well, as we drove along, we began to think a little about this title and had little trouble imagining what the sermon might include.

Although we may laugh from time to time at the mention of “sin,” the subject of ethics and public and private morality has received a lot of press in recent years. Even the cover story in *Time* magazine some weeks ago was entitled “Whatever happened to Ethics?” Hardly a week goes by when our media reports a new scandal – in business, in government – even in the church. We all read stories about Enron, WorldCom, members of hospital boards, the lottery corporations, even the respected R.C.M.P. And in the last analysis it’s about greed for more money and a lust for those things that we don’t have. And it all begs the question: “What’s wrong?”

Quite apart from all the exposés that the media has been serving us lately, there seems to be a new interest emerging in the whole subject of Ethics. Business and Management Consultant firms have begun to offer courses and seminars in

Business Ethics. Large hospitals have set up their own Medical Ethics committees. Universities, College and Business Schools are offering more and more courses on the subject, and every book store now displays a selection of literature on Ethics in all the different disciplines. At first glance, this seems to indicate a new interest in right and appropriate behaviour. But in fact, I believe it reveals a vacuum, a certain moral rootlessness in our society where “anything goes.” I believe that people are beginning to ask questions, to wonder whether “anything *does* go” after all. I believe that, despite the liberal attitudes that are fashionable today people are experiencing a moral struggle in their lives, an uneasiness with issues that demand a choice between conflicting values. I believe people are searching for a reason to behave in a way which is morally justifiable, morally right.

A number of decades ago, we were hearing about the New Morality. Its prophets proclaimed that freedom from outmoded rules would give rise to a generation that was guilt-free, hangup-free and totally together. Well, we’re still looking for that generation! It was as Lord Shawcross wrote in the London Observer at that time: “The New Morality is too often the old immorality condoned.” But we don’t hear much of that kind of talk anymore. What we’re hearing these days is, “How can I deal with moral conflict?” “Who is there to tell me what is right?” “What are the rules today?” “*Are* there any rules?”

At the very centre of these questions is today’s scripture passage. Writing to the Romans, Paul addresses this very same issue – moral conflict and struggle. Paul has been talking about human behaviour and what kind of actions are pleasing to God. He has been talking about God’s law and human sin. And what we read in these verses appears very much to reflect his own personal struggle, a conflict between what he knows to be right (what he knows the law of God is telling him to do) and what he really wants to do (what his own nature tells him would be good).

When Paul writes, "...what I do is not the good thing I want to do. No, the evil thing I do not want, this I keep on doing," he is talking out loud about the dilemma that every Christian faces. For even when we know quite clearly what is right, we all too frequently fail to behave in the way we should. Whether the issue is money, sex, power or simply telling the truth in a difficult situation, we usually know what we *should* do, but so often we are driven by an inner compulsion to act according to our own desires, rather than act according to God's law. And Paul shares our feelings of helplessness over this same thing. So frustrated, and with a kind of desperation he cries out, "Who will rescue me from this death?" Then, I imagine, with a little shrug and a great sigh of relief he says, "Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

I believe that these few verses contain words of encouragement to us all. It's comforting, isn't it, to read that Paul's inner struggle is not so very different from the struggle we have today. We want so much to do the good thing, the right thing, yet time and time again we end up doing just the very thing we didn't mean to do! But it's a consolation to read that this moral struggle is the sign of a healthy life because it is from this deep, personal struggle that true ethical behaviour springs. The apostle writes frankly, openly admitting to his own personal struggle, without showing the slightest trace of self-righteousness or the kind of ecstatic fundamentalism that would cloud the issue and make him out to be right all the time. What we see here is an open and honest man, humbled by his own moral limitations, but strengthened by the clarity of his perception.

There is something else interesting about this scripture reading. That is Paul's attitude to sin. He takes sin very seriously indeed. This is an issue that modern, sophisticated people don't want to deal with, because it brings them face to face with the fact that, lurking beneath the surface in each one

of us is a tendency toward evil. It is something which separates us from what is perfect and what is totally satisfying. It twists the good and perverts the truth. And yet, only when we are prepared to admit to helplessness in the face of sin can we experience any freedom from it. One of the most therapeutic moments in public worship is when we say together with sincerity and conviction, "I acknowledge and confess my manifold sins and wickedness...which I have committed by thought, word, and deed." You see, the healing in confession comes when we are honest enough to admit that we need to make changes in our lives, that we need to grow, that we need to be loved and to be forgiven. Paul takes sin seriously.

But the highlight of this reading for me is when Paul cries out in his helplessness, "Who will rescue me from this death?" For his answer puts our own personal moral dilemmas into perspective. The core of this gospel message is that in Jesus Christ we have a God who rescues us. A God who declares us worthy to stand before him, despite our sin and brokenness. So Paul is celebrating the redemptive presence of Christ in our struggle. No longer do we have to battle alone against the bad that is within us. Because of Christ and what he has done for us on the cross, the outcome of our struggle is now determined. Because of Christ, each one of us can say with complete confidence and serenity, "In Him, I win."

So Paul's message seems particularly apt for us today, confused as so many of us are about what is right and what is wrong. He tells us to persevere – to persist in the struggle against evil, and to wage war for what is right. He tells us to take sin seriously, to admit to moral failure and, above all, not to lose heart. For although in our weakness we may lose a few battles, with Christ the war against sin will be won. For we do not fight alone.

*Lord Jesus, from whom no secrets are hidden,  
Grant us grace to persevere in our struggle to do the  
right thing, to speak the right word and to think the  
right thought.*

*Keep us from all self-righteousness that would  
judge others too quickly and forget our own unworthi-  
ness. And in your love, keep the joy of your victory  
ever before our eyes.*

*Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

## PASS THE PLATE

Mark 12:41-44

*He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."*

I was chatting to a friend of mine the other day about why people go to church, what they expect to find there, and what sort of things turn them off. My friend looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, then he said, "You know, Bill, there are three things that really make churchgoers mad." I was intrigued and asked him to go on. "Well," he said, "Folks really object to changes in the service that they don't understand. They also get angry if you choose hymns they don't know and can't sing! But what really puts people off is being asked for money all time."

Well, this conversation sprang to mind when I was thinking about today's scripture reading, and about the little incident that occurs in the twelfth chapter of Mark's gospel. It is the story of a widow who goes to church, what she does there, and what Jesus has to say about what she does.

Let's imagine, for a moment, that we are in Jerusalem, sitting in the temple after having listened to Jesus teach for most of the day. Right now, Jesus is taking a break, resting quietly for a few minutes near the place where the offering place is situated. From time to time, large sums of money are dropped into the plate by the well-dressed, affluent looking people who pass by. Suddenly, Jesus shows a great deal of interest in a woman who is coming up to the plate all alone. Her shabby clothes and work-worn hands show very clearly that she is poor and must work hard for a living. Unaware that Jesus is watching her, she drops two coins into the offering plate – perhaps her entire income for days. And we sit there, our eyes on Jesus, waiting to see what he will do.

Now, what interests me most about this story is how Jesus reacted in this situation. He let her do it! If it had been me – on a good day! – I might have taken her coins, run after her and given them back. And said something feeble like, “Here, you don't have to do that. You need it more than the church does.” But Jesus didn't do that. He let her give her gift, and he praised her for it. Then, turning to the people who had witnessed the little scene, he said something very interesting. “Do you know that she has given more than all the others because she gave through sacrifice to herself,” he said. “The others gave what was left over. She gave of her own.” And Jesus watched her go home that day, knowing that there was, for her, joy in her giving.

Now, what if we'd really been there, you and I? What if one of us had gone up to that woman as she was leaving the church? What if we'd stopped her and asked, “Why did you give what you did?” I wonder what she would have said. In all probability, she'd tell us she gave for a number of predictable reasons – reasons we could all relate to. She may have said that she loved the house of God and felt she really belonged there. She may have said that she gave because she wanted to contribute to something she really believed in. And then, per-

haps, she might have quietly admitted another reason for her action. The most important reason. Perhaps she would have told us that she gave because she wanted to say something special to God.

She gave because the house of God was something she belonged to. In all probability, she had grown up in Jerusalem; she had come to the temple for years, kneeling there, standing there, singing there. There she had come as a young bride to ask God's blessing on her marriage. There she had brought her children to be blessed. When her husband died, she had come for support, which she had found. She felt that there, in God's place with God's people, she really belonged. And because she belonged, she wanted to do something to contribute. Probably she did, in fact, give of herself in many other ways too – she might have belonged to the temple auxiliary, helping out wherever she was needed. But even so, she gave her money – money which she could ill afford, because she loved God. How easy it would have been for her to watch the more affluent give their large sums of money and say to herself, "I'll let them do it for me. They're better able." But no, she was saying, "I too belong here, and I too will respond."

Secondly, the woman gave because she believed. She believed in what was going on inside the temple. She believed that God was there, constantly available to her family, to herself. She watched what the priests and rabbis were doing, teaching people and praying with them; helping the poor and offering sacrifice. And she believed that their work was bringing God into people's lives as they had brought him into her life, and that their work was essential if people were to find a wholeness to their lives. So her two coins were dropped into the plate – a vote of confidence, with gratitude and love.

How committed are we to what happens in our church? Do we regard our worship, our educational programs, our outreach endeavours as essential to our lives and the life of the community? Or are they something we do if nothing else bet-

ter comes up? Is our church only something we believe in if conditions are right?

The Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung once wrote,

Among all my patients in the second half of life, there has not been one whose problem did not stem from their failure to find a religious outlook on life; and none of them has been really healed who has not regained that religious outlook.

The good news that we in the church offer the world, is not something optional, but something which is essential for our very well-being. We worship and serve the one who says, “I am come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.”

Thirdly, the widow in the temple gave because she wanted to say something special to God. She wanted to say something like, “God, my Father, I belong to you. I believe in what you are doing in my life. And I am grateful. Please accept me and my gift because I love you.” Now there are many ways of telling God just where he rates in our lives, but one way to tell where our hearts are is to look at what we give away. You see, Jesus talked a great deal about money; no less than sixteen out of the thirty-eight parables dealt with how to handle money and possessions. In the gospels, an amazing one out of ten verses deals directly with the subject of money. The Bible offers five hundred verses on prayer, five hundred verses on faith, but more than two thousand verses on money and possessions. Why is it so important? Because God knew how profoundly money affects our lives for good and for ill. He knows that the way we use money speaks volumes about the people we really are – our priorities, our commitments, and what’s important to us.

In his second letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 9, verse 6), Paul writes, “Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will

also reap sparingly. And whoever sows generously will also reap generously.” You and I ask much of God – we come to him with our worries, our problems and our woes. And the story of the widow brings us up short and causes us to ask ourselves, “What am I really offering to God?” “Am I really giving of my best?” You see, the widow’s offering brought her great blessings, and her gift merited the special attention of the Son of God.

*Lord Jesus, you have been so good to me! Your abundant grace and daily bread sustain me and fill my life with more than I can imagine. And now I hear you say to me, “Unto whom much is given, much is required.” Give me, O Lord, a generous spirit – to find joy in my giving and fresh blessing in serving your church.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## WHEN EVERY THING IS NOT ENOUGH

Luke 14:15-18

*One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.'*

Some time ago, I was in my office talking to a young couple who were preparing for marriage. We were discussing the church and the need for spiritual support in life and in marriage. I could tell that my line of conversation was frustrating the young man. Finally, he stopped me. "Look, Reverend," he said. "You tell us we need God. But we don't. We've got it made, just the way we are. Religion is only a crutch and we don't need it. We've just bought a home. We both have jobs. And we have each other. What more could we want? We've got it made!"

According to the social sciences, you and I have three very basic needs. These are security, meaningful work and intimate friendship. It is said that a person's happiness and fulfillment in life depends on whether or not these three needs

are met and satisfied. What the young bridegroom was telling me was, “I’ve got security, it’s in my home. I’ve got meaningful work. And I’ve got a woman – the most beautiful woman in the world. What more could I ever need?”

In this passage from Luke’s gospel, Jesus of Nazareth is telling a parable about “having it made.” About the basic needs in life and about the people who settle for less. People who are offered 100% living, but who accept 10% and call it happiness. In this parable, God is seen as a generous host, who prepares a great banquet for you and for me – a magnificent spread, with something to satisfy every human need. The invitations have all gone out and finally, when everything is ready, he sends out his messengers – his ministers – to tell the guests, “Now is the time! Come and enjoy all the wonderful things that have been prepared for you!” But one after another, the people begin to make excuses. One says, “I have bought a piece of land. I cannot come.” What he was really saying was, “I have my security and I don’t need what you are offering.”

All of us need security of some kind. We need the security of a settled home – people who are constantly moving find it very hard to feel secure. We need the security of consistent, ongoing relationships with parents, with peers and, as we grow up, with husbands and with wives. And certainly, a major symbol of security in our society is owning our own home.

Some of you may have read the book or seen the film, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* by Mordecai Richler. It is the story of a young man, growing up in Montreal. He longs for happiness and fulfillment, and is obsessed with the desire to acquire property of his own. He cannot forget his Grandfather’s words, “If you own property, Duddy, you’ll have it made.” So Duddy cheats. He uses people. Eventually, he gets his property. But as he stands there gazing at what he owns, there is no happiness in Duddy.

The second man reports that he has five team of oxen and that he has to work them. “I’m sorry, Master,” he says impa-

tiently, “But I just can’t leave my work right now. I love it, you see. And it gives me a lot of satisfaction. Frankly, I don’t need what’s on your table.” Well, all of us need satisfaction and reward for what we do, whether it’s in the home or the classroom, in the office or the factory. But some people allow work to take over their entire lives. Work becomes all that matters, everything else is secondary – including friends, family and God. These are the workaholics – all too numerous in our society which demands high achievement, excellence, and a highly competitive spirit if we are to make our mark. But if we totally surround ourselves with work, we create barren little islands for ourselves. We may succeed in becoming rich and powerful, but we also succeed in cutting ourselves off from the rest of the world.

The third person says, “I have just got married, so I certainly don’t need to come.” We need only read the alarming and tragic statistics on marriage failure in these troubled times to see that marriage is not a “cure-all” for troubled adolescents. So many young people enter into this very special contract confused and anxious, believing that the magic of marriage will solve all their problems. Alas! Before too long they find there’s no magic at all, only disappointment and regret. Too late, they come to realize that the marriage relationship is only as strong as those who enter into it.

What the parable of the Great Supper is saying, is that God has invited us all to his wonderful banquet of life. What, then, is our response? Do we find ourselves making excuses? Saying, “Lord, I don’t need you or your feast because my basic needs are already met.” Do we claim that we have security, that we have satisfaction and that we have someone special to love? And say, “Lord, I’ve got it all made without you, and I don’t need you.” Because if we do, we should look again at God’s message. It’s very clear. He says that security is more than owning a home. It’s more than job satisfaction and good relationships. These things can be taken from us all too easily.

No, security is knowing who we are and where we are going. This is the only true security.

You see, for us Christians, satisfaction has to come from more than work. It comes when we see that our creativity and our talents are gifts of God, and that we must use them not just for ourselves and in our own interests, but in the interest of others too. It comes when we offer our knowledge and judgement, our skills and experience to the greater glory of God. It comes when we take whatever God has given us and say, “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.” This is true satisfaction.

And there is something else that we, as Christians, must understand. Human relationships, however satisfying, however beautiful and tender and loving, can never be a substitute for our relationship with God. Our need for friendship can only be satisfied totally when we are friends with God. When we love him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. And when we love our neighbour as we do ourselves. Only then do we have true satisfaction and lasting security.

Have you noticed something rather disturbing about this parable? It is something which Christ tells us at the very end of the story. It concerns those who accept the invitation to God’s banquet. It is the poor, the maimed, the halt and the blind. The poor – those who have no property, yet find their security in God. The maimed – those who cannot work, but find satisfaction in giving what they have to others. The blind and the disfigured – those people who no one wants. The outcasts. The people who no one loves, no one wants to marry. These are the people who come to God and share in his banquet.

So who really “has it made?” Like the young man in my office, people can claim that they don’t need God. That religion is “just a crutch” to support the weak. But you and I know that this crutch is something we cannot do without. For despite all outward appearances, we are the poor, we are the maimed, we are the lame and the blind and the disfigured. But

we have all received an invitation. An invitation to a sumptuous feast, the like of which is beyond our wildest dreams. Are we willing to accept?

*Thank you, Lord, for the poverty that makes me need you. Thank you for the blindness that makes me take your arm. Thank you for failure that brings me into your healing presence.*

*In Christ. Amen.*

## *Thanksgiving*

# WHY ME?

Luke 17:11-14

*On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean.*

Over the past few years, we've been hearing a lot about the plight of farmers in our country. Commodity prices are down; often they do not cover production costs. The farm, it is said, is in trouble. In a television interview some time ago, a farm wife from Saskatchewan was telling of her personal agony. After struggling on for many years trying to eke out a meagre living from ever-diminishing returns, the family had eventually made the decision to leave the farm – a farm that had been in the family for over four generations. "Probably it's wrong for me to say," the woman admitted sadly, "but every day I ask 'Why us?' 'Why me?'" What a desperate question! A question that has no simple answer. Nevertheless, it's probably the most human of all questions. "Why me?"

A few months ago, a man I know went to his doctor for some tests. "Just routine," he was assured. But then he gets a call. Cancer is suspected. A few days later the suspicions are confirmed and my friend has to go into hospital for surgery. Devastated, he looks at me and says, "Why me?" A single

mother with two small children suddenly is informed that her job is redundant. Unemployed and fearful she comes to me and says, “Why me?” Although not all of us have to deal with illness and poverty, most of us at some point in our lives must face some form of suffering, whether it’s the grief one feels when someone close to us dies or the pain of a marriage breakdown. At times like these it’s easy to get depressed, and before we know where we are we have contracted an acute case of the “Poor-Me’s.” Like the farm wife in Saskatchewan, we cry out in our pain, “Why me, Lord? It’s not fair, I don’t deserve this.”

As we celebrate Thanksgiving, we come to one of the most dramatic stories in the New Testament. It is the story of ten sick men. Lepers. Ten human beings cut off from mainstream living, cast out by society and the people they loved. Condemned to a life of deprivation, loneliness and despair, one can almost hear their bitter question: “Why me? What did I do wrong? My God, why me?”

But one day, something wonderful happens! These ten men hear about a travelling preacher, Jesus of Nazareth. He will be passing through a nearby village on his way to Jerusalem...maybe they can meet him, maybe they can listen to what he has to say. So the men set out and arrive at the place where Jesus is expected. Then they see him. They shout to him, as loud as they can because they dare not come down into the main street. Jesus hears them, and their lives are transformed. Their bodies are made whole and their health is restored. Overjoyed, nine of them take the gift of new life and run home to their families. But the story focuses on the tenth man. He goes a few steps down the road with the rest, then, for some reason, he hesitates. He stands there for a moment catching his breath, and then he turns and takes a second look at the Nazarene. And he comes back. He comes back to say “thank you.”

Today, as we celebrate Thanksgiving, we might pause a little to speculate why this man was different from the rest.

What was going on inside him? Obviously he was a man who was more perceptive than the others. Whether he articulated it or not, he was saying, “This is a gift. What have I done to deserve it?” And because he thought that way, because he saw his new life as a gift and not as something that was his by right, he realized that he could not just take it and run with it. I can imagine that there were many quiet moments in the years which followed, when this man would stop what he was doing and think about Jesus. When he would look at his body, whole again, free from disease, and would say in wonder and in joy, “Lord, why me? I was a leper, a dead man. Now I’m alive. Why me?” Maybe, just maybe he turned that powerful two-word question from an expression of anguish and despair into a statement of wonder, gratitude and thanksgiving.

You see, somewhere along the line, we have the idea that somewhere, somebody out there owes us a healthy, uncomplicated, affluent, satisfying life. And when anything goes wrong we start to yell, “Why me?” We fail to see life as a gift because we have come to believe that everything we have, everything we own, we deserve. Believing that money will buy us all the good things of life, we rationalize our position by telling ourselves how hard we’ve worked, how well we’ve planned, how much we’ve sacrificed to attain the lifestyle we enjoy. “It’s my life,” we may say complacently. “I call the shots. I deserve the credit.”

Now, maybe that doesn’t describe the way all of us think. But do you see the danger in this kind of attitude? You see, if deep down inside, we feel that we are entirely responsible for our own success...if we congratulate ourselves on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, then there’s no longer any room for God. Maybe that’s what the nine lepers felt who took their gift and ran. They may have been thinking to themselves, “Finally, I have what I deserve. Now I have my health and I can get on with living *my* life in *my* way.” And so they left Christ out of the picture. They went on their way.

Dr. Hans Sellier, author of many books on stress, believes that there is one human emotion which counters stress more effectively. This is gratitude. As you and I celebrate this Thanksgiving, many of us face uncertain futures. As we look around us we see too many friends whose marriages are ending in the divorce courts; too many people who are unemployed and made redundant by our society; too many people dying from cancer and disease. But, like the leper, we can stop a second and think, “Why me, Lord? I have two beautiful children who can respond to my love.” “Why me, I have my health and strength and plans for the future?” “I have a faith; I know of the grace and forgiveness of a loving God.” “I have a church where I can worship God and feel at Peace; why me, Lord? Why me, when so many of my friends don’t have these wonderful things? Why me?”

The story of the ten lepers reminds us that, as Christians, we have a new perspective. To each and every one of us, Christ has offered us the chance of a new life. But we must make a choice. We may decide to go on our way, focusing resentfully on our disappointments, our shattered plans and our broken dreams. Or we can pause a moment and focus instead on the rich and glorious heritage we have been promised as God’s children. Turning back to God with wonder, surprise and humble thanksgiving, we too can say, “Thank you, Lord. Why me?”

*Forgive me, Lord, for my complaining! All was going so well until last month. I don’t understand why the good times can’t go on – I thought I was in control. But I was wrong. Lord, today you carried me! Thank you, Lord – for never giving up on me! Amen.*