

GOD:
THE RUMOURS PERSIST!!

Signs of Faith in a Sceptical World

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Chapter One

Making Contact with an Irrepressible God

Pre-reading reflection:

Would you describe yourself as a religious person? Why or why not?
How would you describe your own relationship with God?

“God shows up in all kinds of crazy places.” That’s a quote from a friend of mine who spoke of God as a divine presence that would not be silenced, not shut down or denied. For him, God was a great mystery that he found in his own human experience in spite of moments of doubt and even denial. For him this God showed up in some very strange and unexpected places.

There is a wild debate about religion going on in the world today. Perhaps, it is because of the rise of fundamentalist forms of both Christianity and Islam. Scholars, journalists, commentators and many other thoughtful people are debating the usefulness of religion. Is it the cause of so much wrong in our world as some claim? Why does it continue to persist?

For many of us, religion has been a positive thing, giving structure, community and hope for our lives. As well, there

seems to be in every one of us a longing for something deeper, something which from time to time enlarges our lives, a mystery that we cannot touch or control. The debate over what this mystery is and how one can experience it, whether it's an emotional delusion, as Richard Dawkins says it is, or just a reflection of ourselves off the clouds, is one of the great issues that is defining our time. God seems to be back.

Author, Timothy Keller, in his book, "The Reason for God" describes the intensity of this debate. "It may seem to many of us that atheism and scepticism are on the rise in our country and that Christian churches are in decline. Not so."

says Dr. Keller. "The fact is that both scepticism and Christian faith are on the rise in North America." He cites both the rise of human secularism and Christian belief. "Although, the old mainline Protestant churches are aging and losing members, many people are opting instead for a non-religious life, for a personally-constructed spirituality or they are choosing orthodox, high-commitment groups of Christians, churches that expect members to have

a conversion experience." He cites his own church in downtown New York, a Presbyterian church which has grown to six thousand people on Sunday mornings, mostly young single executives or academics, all less than forty years of age. "Yes," he says, "the numbers of the non-religious are growing but the numbers of committed religious people are growing, too. Both are on the rise."

When we are talking about evidence for this irrepressible God, it is against the background of a clear culture shift. The parents of these young parishioners worshipping in Manhattan may have been hostile to Christianity but many of their children are not. Unlike their parents, they do not share a culture

Stop and Think

- 1. What evidence do you see for the rise or decline of religion in the world today?*
- 2. Can you give examples of religion as a positive or negative force in the world?*

of resistance to the old pre-sixties religious forms and come to Christianity with an open and inquisitive mind.

Some time ago, I spent six months recovering from a fall and subsequent surgery on my knee. It gave me a lot of time to reflect, read and pray. Some of these experiences turned out to be holy moments that engulfed me in the hands of a God who will not be silenced, a God who persists in loving, healing and entering our intellects as well as our hearts.

Among these experiences are two recent books I received and a television interview. Some of you may think that I have a step up on all these things and that I have an endless warranty on God's grace but I don't. Like any of you, I sometimes feel an absence of God's presence and experience doubt, especially in my case with loss of freedom or loss of control over my life because of age or fear. The fear is that all of this may be a permanent loss. You become very vulnerable to self-pity and the tendency to see yourself as a victim.

Through all of this, I found times of encouragement and a grace that held me those important inches above the slough of self-pity. The books I referenced were "God Is" by David Adams Richards and Anne Rice's book, "Out of Darkness, Spiritual Confession". Both authors are people in midlife who were raised in the Church, lost their faith in their twenties and over the past ten or so years found it again. Both found their return a very positive, renewing experience. Other peoples' religious experiences have always been a source of inspiration and vision for me, particularly in times of doubt. It has been encouraging to look at other people who believe and not only talk about it but live their faith out in gracious kindness and generosity.

I suspect that I'm not alone in the experience of being encouraged by the faith of others. We can too often narrow our expectations for our experiences of God to the grace of those

Stop and Think

1. Has someone else's faith been an encouragement to you? How so?

once-in-a-lifetime experiences as some privileged people have, seeing a light in the sky or having a “St. Paul Damascus” experience, which make all things clear and answer all questions. However, if we do this, we not only will be waiting a long time for God to show up, but we’ll be missing out on the many ways that God has designed to touch our lives with his love and mercy.

What do we do with that strange little book of two years ago called “The Shack” written by a previously unknown author, William Young? The novel deals with a man whose little daughter is kidnapped and murdered and how the narrator encounters God in such a way as to find, through a deep struggle of faith, resolution and peace. It was on the bestseller list for more than two years, selling millions of copies in several languages around the world. Why did that happen? Why was a book that speaks of the Christian experience of God, albeit in novel form, so popular in a culture that persists in denying God’s very existence? Perhaps, this too was evidence of an irrepressible God, a God that will not be silenced, will not be outlawed from the world that he has made.

The television interview that I mentioned happened some time in September of 2009 between Melissa Fung, a CBC reporter, and a woman from Columbia, Ingrid Betancourt. Both women had been hostages, one in Afghanistan and the other in South America at the hands of a Marxist guerrilla group.

There was remarkable warmth between the two women in the interview. They had much in common, having shared suffering at the hands of cruel and dangerous men. But there was another key similarity, a mutual declaration of faith and the fact that they’d both used rosaries to guide their prayers on a daily basis.

“Do you still pray, do you still believe?” asked Melissa Fung of Ingrid Betancourt. “Oh yes,” she said. “I’m absolutely certain of God’s love for me.” Then the camera, in one of these rare moments, caught both their faces. Their smiles

radiated all the way to me, smiles of confidence, smiles of pure peace. This was a profound moment of grace, orchestrated by this awesome God who wishes us only grace and mercy.

I believe that our days and our nights are full of these moments. They are moments when God wants to connect in powerful ways, when God enters those cracks in our busyness, our intellects and hearts. God enters, despite our self-absorption, not in condemnation, but in a redeeming and forgiving love.

The Bible itself is a book written by people who themselves experienced this awesome thing beginning with Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Job, David, Isaiah. As well, God has never restricted himself to one people or one culture. Down through the ages, the God and Father of all humanity, all created in his image, must have tried to reveal himself in many ways. Some got it and others did not.

St. Paul writes in Romans, Chapter One, “For since the creation of the world, God’s visible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature has been clearly seen being understood from what he has made.” “As well as that, God did this so that people everywhere would seek him and find him though he is not far from us.”

The Russian novelist, Dostoevsky, wrote, “The one essential condition of human existence is that humanity, men and women, should always be able to bow down before something infinitely great.” If we are deprived of the infinitely great, or deny that there is anything greater than the self, human experience is reduced to that of a beast and we die of despair.

Of all the revelations of the Divine down through human history, none has made as profound an impact as a birth in a stable in Bethlehem. It happened in a time when no one was really looking. It happened in a dark alley behind an inn. The

Stop and Think

1. Is there a biblical character that is a particular favourite of yours? What is it about their story that resonates with you?

parents of the child were rather insignificant people but nonetheless people of faith, people very open to the purposes of God. Certainly, the birth was no surprise to them. Both of them had received unusual sighting in the form of angels telling Mary “You will be with child by the Holy Spirit” and Joseph “Take her to be your wife.” Both followed the promptings of these strange experiences, I’m sure in fear and trepidation. The boy child was born and they called him Jesus.

Within thirty years this man had grown and gathered around him disciples and taught what he called the kingdom of God. Some saw his teaching as a threat to their own self control others saw it as rescue

As John in his gospel described it, “He came to his own and his own received him not. But for those who did receive him, who believed in his name, these became children of God.”

I’d like to close this chapter with two questions. Where in the last few months might you have made contact with this irrepressible God? If you have done that, what difference has it made? Of all the Christian festivals, none is celebrated by the secular world around us as is Christmas. Whether they are followers of Christ or not, people put up lights and Christmas trees, buy presents, overeat, overspend and enjoy the music. There seems to be this over-abundance of opportunities to meet this irrepressible God.

The real question is: How can we connect with, make contact with, this God in Christ? I believe that happens first of all in worship and secondly in the work of love. The best response to a connection with the Infinitely Great is worship, an act of humility in the face of this divine “invasion”, this coming into our “air space” of a loving and compassionate God.

We need to see God’s presence, not as a threat to our own self-importance or our own power, but instead as a rescue plan for our broken and lonely lives. Humility is the key ingredient to worship. It is always prefaced with a longing for something we don’t have.

A few years ago on Christmas Eve in the church where I served, a few of us were at the front getting ready for the first service. Out of the night came a young man, knapsack over his shoulder and a toque on his head. He plunked himself down in the front pew, watching, and said to me, “Hey dude, what’s happening?” I explained that it was Christmas Eve and we were gathering to celebrate that and invited him to join us. His question was, “How do I qualify?” It’s a great question. In a moment of unusual clarity, at least for me, I responded, “All you need is a hunger for God tonight and you will find him here.”

Jesus’ coming is still a threat to some, particularly those of us who choose to run their own lives apart from him, depending only on ourselves. Worship, however, is acknowledging that we are indeed hungry and thirsty and that all the things and all the glitz and all the success we may have achieved are not enough to satisfy our hearts.

I have this hunger for God. Worship acknowledges that hunger and sees Jesus not as threat but as rescue. So, we may go to church or a quiet place, where we bow our heads and sometimes our knees, stop talking about ourselves, and listen for a word that just might change our lives.

The second place we will find God is described in one of Jesus’ parables in Matthew 25, often called the “Parable of the Sheep and the Goats”. In this story, people are told that they have already met God and experienced this close encounter. This comes as a great surprise to them. They said, “When did we see you, Lord?” Christ’s response was, “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and old and you visited me. I was a stranger and you took me in.” And they replied, “But Lord, we never saw you that way, hungry, sick or a stranger in need of care.” And the Lord responds, “Because you have done these things for the least of these, you have done it for me.” To have encounters of God, we need to go to the food bank, the cloth-

ing depot, volunteering at a shelter or a nursing home. “For being with the least” he says, “is being with me.” It is through worship and the work of love, where we will see him.

Finally, what difference might this make to my life? St. Paul, in one of his letters, lays out in very clear words two very different lifestyles. He calls them the way of the flesh and the way of the spirit. We might call it doing life our own way or doing life God’s way; they are like two magnetic poles pulling us in opposite directions. The self-absorbed life pulls us into a vortex characterized by ambition, envy, jealousy and hatred, with families divided and “desperate housewives”, “sex in the city”, you name it. But, the second pole pulls in a very different direction. In Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible, “The Message”, he says, “It pulls you to care for others, about having exuberance about life, serenity, a sense of compassion, loyal commitments and self-control.” I suspect that most of us live somewhere between these poles. Most of us do experience a little envy, jealousy or wanting revenge, but we know that those are not our better days. The question is what pole do we really want to control our lives as persons and families?

You may remember the story of the Aboriginal boy who seeks advice from his wise grandfather. The young man tells of two forces in his life that are pulling him in opposite directions, fighting for control. He calls them two wolves. “One wolf, Grandfather, is telling me to be aggressive and fight for my rights. Get ahead. Look out for number one only. The other wolf tells me to care for others, to listen to others, to be generous and grateful. Grandfather, which wolf will win?” The old man replied, after some thought, “The wolf that wins will be the one that you feed.”

There are many ways to experience and connect with this irrepressible God. It can happen in a quiet moment, when we are bending our knee before the Infinitely Great, acknowledging our need for His love. It can happen when we share that

love for others, by sharing our money, our kindness and our time. It is likely then that we are “feeding the right wolf” and we’ll find love, joy and a peace that passes all understanding.

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. Bishop Hockin writes about “holy moments” when he felt close to God and times when he feels “an absence of God’s presence” and experiences doubt. Have you had the same kinds of experiences? Share about one or two of your own “holy moments” and times of doubt. What circumstances seemed to contribute to these times?
2. The chapter talks about being encouraged by hearing of the faith journey of others, can you think of others who have inspired you in this way? What about incidents in your own life that might help others? These might be times of great blessing or when you have received help or assurance when in great difficulty.
3. Bishop Hockin writes that the Christmas story is the most profound of God’s interventions in the world. Why do you think this story so captures people’s imaginations, even those who are not practicing Christians? What has it meant to you?
4. We’ll close this section with Bishop Hockin’s questions: Where in the last few months might you have made contact with this irrepressible God? If you have done that, what difference has it made?

Questions for Bible Study Matthew 25: 31-46

1. Have you ever had an encounter with another person when you felt God was especially present? What was it like?
2. According to this passage where might we encounter Jesus in our own communities?
3. What are the different responses described here? What are the consequences of those responses?
4. How do you think Jesus hearers might have reacted to this teaching?
5. Who have you encountered recently that might have offered an opportunity to serve Jesus? How did you respond to that encounter?
6. What can we do to open up more opportunities to meet Jesus in other people?

Chapter Two

A Second Track in a One-Track World

Pre-reading reflection:

What signs of religion and spirituality were evident in the wider society when you were a child?

How about today?

What might explain the changes?

For those of you who grew up in the late 1940's and early 1950's, there was an assumption that whoever we were and whatever our condition of life may have been, alongside our lives existed a second reality. It might be called the spiritual, religious, church or God reality. We all assumed this parallel universe existed. Some did not like it. It seemed stuffy at times, not given to change. For some it was restrictive but still there was this reality which we took for granted. Some of the symptoms of this parallel universe were prayer and Bible readings in public schools. There was prayer to open local council meetings, churches were full, the baby boomer generation was in Sunday school, new curriculums were being written by churches for Christian education. There were new churches being built in suburbia.

I remember when I was first ordained in the early 1960's. I was asked by a local M.L.A. to say a prayer of blessing at the opening of a new sewer system in our community. The

Catholic priest joined me and both of us wondered why we were there. There was an assumption that being a Canadian was being a Christian and church and state were quite connected. As we know, that has all dramatically changed. In the late 1960's and early 1970's over a span of twenty to thirty years, that assumption dissolved and a new liberated culture of secularism and humanism emerged and triumphed in the minds of a new generation. Often this was driven by a belief that religion and spirituality were all part of a dark and repressive past and, therefore, must be denied. The results of that are well known. Religion is no longer part of the public consciousness. Seventy percent of Canadians wake up on Sunday morning with no inclination to go to church. They may consider hockey practice or brunch at your local greasy spoon but not church. One could say that we now live in a one-track world, a world that takes its cues from consumerism, business, individualism and/or science and reason but never from the religious voice.

For a lot of people, religion had become a dangerous, damaging force, something better practised privately and kept at a distance. At least, that's the way it was until the 1990's. Somehow during those years, scarcely ten or fifteen years ago, there began a reaction to this de-mystifying trend. In the

process of getting rid of the repressive side of old faith systems, we became aware that we had also denied wisdom, mystery and a beauty. For the first time in decades, people were writing and reading religious books again. C.S. Lewis, a writer from the 1940's and '50's had a great revival which remains to this day.

Stop and Think

1. Have you seen evidence of the rejection of religion and its revival where you live and work?

What my title "Second Track in a One-Track World" suggests is that, in this first decade of the twenty-first century, a new generation is entertaining the possibility of a second track

in a one-track world. In spite of the seeming secular victory of the late twentieth century, and a consensus that self-reliance and individualism are what life is all about, some people today are getting very tired of that approach to life. They are entertaining the possibility that we are not meant to live our lives on one track, the track of self-reliance, self-sufficiency and perhaps self-indulgence. Perhaps, there is another track, a second system, a system that can't be touched or seen but nevertheless a system that might touch me.

One of the co-founders of the human genome project and one of the top American scientists in the world, Dr. Francis Collins, confessed that he never thought much about God, dismissing the whole concept as irrelevant to him. He was certainly a one-track guy. As he was getting a medical degree, practising in a hospital in South Carolina and visiting patients as part of the mandatory process, he had a very friendly elderly woman as one of his assigned patients. She was always telling him about her faith, "God is good to me," she said, "I'm okay." He would nod absentmindedly as he took her vital signs and recorded them. One day the woman said, "Dr. Collins, what do you believe?" It was a question that caught him off guard. The question wouldn't let him go. Soon after, upon passing a church he went in to talk to a pastor saying, "I've got a lot of questions." The pastor very wisely gave him a copy of C.S. Lewis' "Mere Christianity". Through the process of reading it, Dr. Collins became a committed Christian and continues to be. This story is found in his book, "The Language of God". That's just one of thousands of stories of people who, tired of denying a longing for intimacy at a spiritual level, have opted for this "second track" openly connecting their lives to this very ancient reality.

Dr. M. Scott Peck, an American psychiatrist, author of "The Road Less Travelled", suggests that one-track living specializes in two things: thing and function. It's about what you've been able to accumulate in terms of things: material assets, the gad-

ets in your kitchen and the latest fashions in your closets. It's also about your profession and how much you've accomplished, in other words – function. However, Peck proposes a second track, not just thing and function, but transcendence and intimacy. Spiritual people, he said, tend to specialize in the latter: spir-

Stop and Think

- 1. What things or accomplishments are important in the first track of your life?*
- 2. How balanced are the tracks in your life?*

ituality, God and close relationships with other people. This second track is not an option to track one. It runs alongside track one in the belief that life lived by thing and function alone fails to satisfy the human spirit. When one sees that it is by the things of God and good relationships, life starts to become whole, balanced and deeply satisfying.

The idea of this second track also comes from The Reverend Rick Warren, author of the bestseller “The Purpose-Driven Life” and pastor of Saddleback Church in southern California. In an article he wrote, he tells of his wife’s struggle with cancer believing for a long time that life goes through hills and valleys, good times and tough times, times of happiness and sadness. But now, he concludes, he thinks differently. He sees our lives as two tracks like a railway. The one is our lives, happy and sad. The second track is God’s grace, love and forgiving power that is constant and unchanging, very close to us, never diverging from us, always there.

The Old Testament prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, also speak of a highway or road in the desert. God in Isaiah 35, in a vision of a better world, says to the prophet, “Strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees. Say to the fearful heart, ‘Be strong, don’t be afraid. God comes to save you.’” Then He says, “A highway shall be there. It will be called a holy way. On that highway you will come to Zion singing with everlasting joy upon your head and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” Again in Isaiah 40, “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” When I read these verses I’m aware

that God, instead of abandoning his people has, in the midst of wild places of our lives, times of loss and deprivation, put this “track” as a way to get through it all. Originally the text was written for God’s people suffering as aliens in captivity in Babylon. It was a highway on which they would find home again. But it is also a word for us. When we feel like aliens living in a strange, one-track world where we may not feel we belong, along comes this offer to get to where we long to be.

David, the psalmist, also very much acquainted with this reality, writes in Psalm 139, “Lord, you know me so well. You are acquainted with all my ways. You are beside me and your hand is upon me. Is there a place in my life where I lose you? If I climb to the heavens you are there. If I go down to the lowest depths you are there also. If I travel and run far away, even there your right hand will never let go of me.”

A few years ago, I was visiting my daughter’s church north of Toronto and read these words in the Sunday bulletin. “Enter Jesus, the one who wowed the crowds, who fed the thousands, healed the sick but, more importantly for you, boarded your commuter train one morning, eased the congestion, found you a seat, sat down beside you, looked into your eyes and listened. Not only did he listen, he understood you. He seemed to know about your pain, your questions, your guilt, your sense of hopelessness, your unrelenting shame. Yet, he kept listening and even more, he understood what you should do next. As he wrapped a warm blanket around your shoulders, he whispered hope, acceptance and forgiveness into your sagging heart and asks you to simply trust him.” Now that is Emmanuel, God with Us. It’s what making a faith commitment to second track living is all about. It’s more than thing and function. It’s about transcendence and intimacy.

Stop and Think

1. If Jesus were to break into your world in this personal way, where would it take place and what might he do or say to bring relief to your “sagging Heart?”

I'd like to suggest that when one believes or connects to the second track, this highway in the wilderness, even dares to believe even that such a thing exists, things start to happen. First, you start hearing things. Spiritual people are sometimes accused of being a little off when they hear voices! I believe we can hear voices and because of this second track, we can hear voices all the time! They tell us that we're loved and in spite of our many mistakes, we are forgivable and have a future. Sometimes I get this imprint in the pages of scripture, "I will never leave you or forsake you" or "Underneath you are the everlasting arms. Don't be afraid. I am always with you." As well as that, second track believers can hear words of direction and correction: That life is not just about me, I am not the center of the universe, I need to care more for others, be more generous or grateful or I talk too much and need to listen more.

The second thing that happens is we start seeing things differently. Our values change. We start valuing people more than profits. We find the accumulation of material wealth less satisfying and barriers of race and class start crumbling as we discover that we're all children of God and need to live in peace. As well as that, what we buy and where we go changes. Second track thinking certainly enjoys material things but it specializes in transcendence, the sense of wonder, mystery, God as well as intimacy and celebration of good relationships with family and friends.

The other thing that second track people do differently is that our behaviour changes. In the gospel story of Zaccheus, Luke 19, we have a classic example of a man who moves from a one-track life to a two-track existence. Zaccheus, according to Luke, is a tax collector and very wealthy. He was well-connected and enjoyed the good life. It was not, however, all that satisfying for him. His life of thing and function was not enough. Why else would he climb a sycamore tree and go out on that limb, in more ways than one, to get a look at this Jesus

of Nazareth? Like a lot of people I know in mid-life, thing and function are wearing thin. We long for change.

In many ways, Zaccheus must have been struggling with a troubled conscience. He knew that his neighbours regarded him more as a fraud than a friend. Moreover, as a tax collector, he was working for the enemy. Even members of his own family, I'm sure, had problems with his lifestyle and compromises. Life for Zaccheus on the one track was certainly hard. We don't know what he knew about Jesus. He might have been attracted to his reputation as a preacher and healer. He probably had no intention of meeting Jesus, just wanted a glimpse of him. He'd perhaps overhear some good soothing words. However, Jesus stops by the sycamore tree, looks up with a smile and calls him by name. "Zaccheus, you and I need to have lunch today." Suddenly this man is encountering a second track, one of transcendence and intimacy. Zaccheus starts hearing different things over lunch, seeing things he hadn't before. As well, he does things he hadn't done before. After that wild lunch, Zaccheus comes out of the front door of his home and says, "Right now I give half of my possessions to the poor. All those people whom I cheated I'm going to repay four times." This is a changed man connecting to this second track of power, all found in this relationship with Jesus Christ who is transcendence and intimacy incarnate. This results in a will and a desire to be generous starting with a 50% tithe to the food bank! The city of Jericho must have been very happy.

In the end, it's all about the choices we make. Is it all about what we have and do or ARE WE prepared to see something else, this second track beside US, this highway running through the wilderness of OUR LIVES, this way of holiness and transcendence and intimacy. It is the way of Christ who longs to put that warm blanket around our shoulders, whispering acceptance and forgiveness into our sagging hearts and asking US to simply trust him.

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. Bishop Hockin writes about the changing role of religion and spirituality in the wider culture from the 1950s to today and argues it went from playing a prominent public role to virtually disappearing before returning to some prominence again in the 1990s. What about in your own life? How has the place of religion and/or spirituality changed for you personally? What might explain those changes?
2. Dr. Francis Collins was brought up short when one of his patients facing serious health issues asked, “what do you believe?” How would you respond if someone asked you that question?
3. For Dr. Collins, C.S. Lewis’ book, *Mere Christianity*, was influential in bringing him to faith. What people, books, or ideas have been important in your own faith journey?
4. The chapter states that we sometimes “feel like aliens living in a strange, one-track world where we may not feel we belong.” Has this been your experience? Have you met God in these times?
5. Bishop Hockin suggests that when we “connect” to the second track, we start hearing things we haven’t heard before and then we start seeing things differently – our priorities shift. How does the thought of these things happening make you feel? Do they foster a desire to connect or cause you to hold back? Or maybe a bit of both?

Questions for Bible Study Luke 19: 1-9

1. Have you ever tried to be anonymous in a crowd in order to see a famous person or attend a special event? How would you feel in such a situation to be singled out?
2. Why do you think Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus gladly – after all, his visit was unexpected?
3. What was Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' visit?
4. There is no record of Jesus preaching a sermon to Zacchaeus or admonishing him for his great wealth, so what do you think prompted such a significant reaction?
5. How does Jesus react?
6. Have you felt the kind of acceptance from Jesus that Zacchaeus did? Do you sense that Jesus wants to come to your house as well?
7. How might this motivate you to respond?

Chapter Three

Locating God

Pre-reading reflection:

What are the things in the natural world that take your breath away, that provoke wonder and awe?

What, for you, are examples of human beings at their best? What are the best of human achievements?

There was a spiritual purity in the demands for justice, truth and an end to tyranny that rocked much of the North African and Arab world in January of 2011. As in all such revolts against the abuse of power by the few over the many, there is clearly a spiritual quality to the cries for justice and for truth.

Bishop Tom Wright, New Testament scholar and the former Anglican Bishop of Durham, refers to these cries as “echoes of a Voice”. He argues that the passions of justice, spirituality, intimacy and beauty are things planted in us which are echoes of the voice of God. “However, none of these by themselves point directly to any God. At best they wave their arms in a general direction like someone in a cave who hears an echoing voice but has no idea where it’s coming from.”

Most of us have some concept of God. It may not be the Christian or the Biblical God. It may be some belief in a distant deity or seeing divinity in life itself. I grew up believing in family and church within a Christian culture and there was little room for atheism. I remember lying awake at night recalling where all our neighbours up and down the street

went to church. In those days they all did. In that era the issue was not the choice between belief and non-belief. It was about those influences that would keep my belief alive.

While we grew up nurtured in our churches, in our late teens and twenties many of us became influenced either intellectually or socially by other forces. The temptation was to trade our old beliefs for something new or indeed for nothing. Atheism held no particular allure for me, perhaps because I never found atheists attractive! The ones I knew or read about tended to argue out of a hyper-intellectualism, to which I could not relate. They suggested that you couldn't prove the existence of God from reason, your mind, or from science and, therefore, He wasn't there. In addition, they had what I thought, was a very low doctrine of human value. As Vladimir Lenin once wrote, "I cannot listen to music too much. After listening to a Beethoven sonata, it makes me want to say kind, stupid things and pat the heads of people but now you have to beat them on the head. Beat them without mercy." The architects of Soviet communism demonstrated what the atheist philosophy does to the human spirit. It denies and deadens it.

If we are to think of God living anywhere, the usual answer is that He lives in heaven. When we were children, it was easy to imagine that as a place somewhere up in the sky beyond the clouds, where the temperature never changes, something like Barbados! When Yuri Gagarin, the first Soviet cosmonaut, landed after orbiting Earth a few times, he declared that he had disproved the existence of God. He had been in the "heavens" and God was not there. Although the word "heaven" in Hebrew and in Greek can mean the sky, the Biblical writers moved beyond seeing God as an object in the universe. Rather they saw heaven as simply God's dwelling place. Again, according to Bishop Wright, "Heaven then is God's space not our space, where God happens to be."

Stop and Think

- 1. What ideas or forces have most shaped the world in your lifetime?*

Another misunderstanding arises when heaven is used to describe that place we go after we die. When we use that language, heaven seems like a destination, a final resting place for our souls. But, if heaven is “where God dwells”, if it is understood as that dimension where God lives in his own space rather than a part of our space in our universe, then going to heaven means simply going to be with God. Thus, heaven is not just a future experience, pie in the sky after we die but is a present reality.

Stop and Think

- 1. What different understanding of heaven have you heard?*
- 2. What is your own view of heaven?*

The question we need to ask is whether or not this dimension where God dwells, this zone of God, ever intersects with our space. Is there interaction between heaven and earth? Again, it is Bishop Tom Wright who suggests that there are three exotic options developed by various schools of thought over the ages. Option one is to slide the two spaces together. In other words, to believe that God’s space and our space are the same. According to this view, God fills our space with himself. God is everywhere and everywhere is God. The word that best describes this view is pantheism. It sees divinity in everything. Thus, everything is sacred. Heaven is here on earth. Look around you, it’s all here. This view was popular in the Greco-Roman world. It finds a home in classical Hinduism as well as in modern paganism.

The disciples of Pantheism strive to find divinity within themselves. They are free to give it any name they desire, but Pantheists do not see God as a separate entity. Rather, He is infused, imbedded in all matter, in all space. Pantheists struggle to explain the existence of evil, when there is no one outside who can rescue you or be appealed to. This also eliminates the possibility of a Higher Being to befriend you or judge wrongdoing. When everything is sacred, there is little room for evil.

Many Pantheists resolve this troublesome issue by denying that evil exists. In other words, you can meditate your way out of evil. One of the implications of modern Pantheism is the belief that everything is equally sacred. Thus, there are people in the animal rights movement who say there is no distinction between animals and humans in terms of value. Both are sacred and, therefore, they deny the words of Genesis when God is blessing human beings, “Be fruitful and multiply in number. Fill the earth and subdue its rule over the fish, the birds and every living creature.” As J.K. Chesterton once said, “When people stop believing in God, it is believed that they believe in nothing. However, the reality is far worse, they can believe in everything.”

A second option for locating God is the view that God’s space and our space are firmly apart, two very different, isolated worlds between which there can be no interaction. This view would subscribe to the idea that God is the architect of the universe but once he created it, He left. He is in his space and we are left very much alone in ours. This view was prevalent in the Greco-Roman world and came from the teachings of Epicurus. There are Gods, and you should respect them, but don’t expect any favours. Jupiter and Zeus may exist but they have no interest in you so get on with your life as best you can.

Much later, in the eighteenth century in Europe, a form of religion called “Deism”, became popular even in some British church circles. The premise of deism was that the universe runs by the rules of mathematics and reason. God is distant and humans should not expect any experience of the divine. The best you could receive is a good rational thought for the day or a lovely poem from a classic writer.

Deists could say they believe in God but never pray nor have an experience of the divine are very comfortable in these two solitudes: God is there and we are here. The implication of this view is that humanity needs to write its own rules

because we are on our own with no hope of divine intervention. We can and should do as we like, follow our own dictates and be as happy as best we can.

For the “well off” that can be a comfortable approach, but for the many whose lives are not easy and can be cruel and harsh, not so much. Less drastically, one might escape into spiritualism or addiction, which offered only a temporary solution at best. Not surprisingly during this period, alcoholism was rampant until the Methodist movement led by The Rev. John Wesley came along to challenge that view and offer an alternative view where God might be found.

This leads us to option three, which is more complicated. Option three is what we find in the three great theistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is the view that God’s space overlaps and interlocks with our space. God makes his presence known, seen and heard within our lives on Earth.

In the early sixties, when I led a group of young teens on a Sunday afternoon in Windsor, Ontario, I asked them the question, “what is God like; where is He”? There were many responses. Most popular was the view that God was an old man with a white beard and long hair sitting on a cloud ‘up there’ but in charge of everything ‘down here’. I noticed one girl, about fifteen, looking very pensive. “Barbara,” I said, “What do you think?” “Well,” she said, “I’m not sure what God looks like but I do know something about him. He’s not ‘up there’. He’s ‘down here’ walking around.”

Her wonderful words captured, I believe, the essence of this third option. Although God’s space and our space are distinct, they are not solitudes, they overlap. The book we call the Bible, the holy books of Judaism and Christianity, are the ancient records of God’s intervention in human affairs. This overlap, according to the Bible, is always God’s initiative.

Appreciating this third option can happen for us in many ways. Few of us wake up in the morning with God smiling at

us at the end of our beds. Few of us hear him speak directly as Joan of Arc heard him. Few of us get to listen to the heavenly choir practice on Thursday nights. However, many of us are privy to moments, to glimpses, to surprises that our human reason cannot explain.

I have had moments like that, especially when I'm alone and quiet. Moments that remind me that the spirit world, although distinct and removed from mine, is not really that far away. Frederick Beuchner, American theologian and Presbyterian minister, wrote, "We are all of us more the mystic than we believe or choose to believe. We have seen more than we let on, even to ourselves. Through some moments of beauty or pain, some subtle turning of our lives, we catch a glimpse of what the saints are blinded by. To stop, ponder, wonder at what all that might be is to enter the dimension of life that religion is a word for."

The classic stories in the Bible of God intervening or overlapping in human lives are found in the stories of Jacob and Moses. All three reported God speaking or appearing to them in some clear forms. For one, it is the man in the night who wrestles with him, for another it is a voice from a burning bush.

In every case there is a similar pattern. First there is a clarification as to where God is. The response of Jacob or Moses is always to become who they really are. The pretence and the pride are all gone. The third step in the pattern is the promise that they will become something more than they are, not just a wanderer in the desert, not just a fugitive from justice but a fuller, honest and productive human being. Finally, all these characters claim that God's world not only intervened momentarily in theirs, but something of that intervention, that overlap, remained in them for the rest of their lives.

Another commonality with these stories is that God appears in their lives when things aren't quite right and there is a call for a change. In the case of Moses, God says "I've

heard the pain and cries of my people in Egypt. Their slavery is wrong. I want them to be free and you are the man for the job.” In other words, the overlap of option three has a lot to do with God wanting to bring justice, fairness and peace to a world that continues to tolerate injustice, hate and conflict. He is seen as a God with something to say, good news for suffering humanity.

Stop and Think

1. What examples do you know of Christians acting in the world to bring justice or right wrongs?

2. Is it possible God might have a role for you in that kind of work?

According to Bishop Tom Wright in his book, *Simply Christian*, “The one true God made a world that was other than himself because that is what love delights to do and having made such a world he has remained in a close, dynamic and intimate relationship with it without, in any way, being contained by it or having it contained within himself.”

One final thought. If option three interests me in locating God, how might the interaction to encounter him happen? For Dag Hammarskjöld, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, it was “When I said ‘yes’ to someone and from that moment life changed. It took on new meaning and I was never alone again and the impossible happened. Life had purpose.” For others of us, it happens through crisis or loss, when our own resources and defences fail us, when we are weak and vulnerable, and ask, “Can anyone out there help me?” Such was the cry of David Crosby of the rock group, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, when in a sober moment in his jail cell, where he was doing time for possession of cocaine, he asks God (if he existed) to help him get off drugs and alcohol. In a wonderful way, God responded and a new life for him began. This story was told by Crosby to Larry King on the CNN programme, Larry King Live. It can happen to any of us, when we decide to forget ourselves and make sacrifices

for someone else. Giorgio Di Cicco, the former poet laureate of the University of Toronto, tells of himself finding God. “In the mid-eighties,” he said, “I arrived at the door of a monastery just outside Toronto. Father Cecil answered the door. I asked, ‘Have you got any use for a middle-aged poet such as me?’” The good father said, “Sure, come on in. Put our library in order, do some dishes and help me pick up the garbage.” “I did.” He said later, “I let my guard down. I became open for God. It was in the discipline and in the serving others that God entered my life.”

In our world of free choices we have many places to find the spirit, or not, as the case may be: Like the pantheists, we can look for God within ourselves and within nature. Like the deists, we can dismiss any divine encounter as a bad dream and believe that God is distant and that he’ll stay that way. Or, we can believe that heaven and earth overlap, and that, like so many others, we could have an experience of the holy and encounter God, as did Moses, Jacob, David Crosby and the poet, Giorgio Di Cicco. In Pantheism and Deism nothing really changes, there is no one to love you, there is no one to accept you as you are, no one to forgive, no one who might invite you to be your true self. What and how we choose to believe is the biggest choice of our lives.

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. If someone asked you for a quick description of God, what would you say?
2. Bishop Hockin writes that he never found atheism attractive, how about you? What ideas about God, life, and the nature of the universe have attracted your attention over the years? What caused you to find some ideas attractive and others not so?
3. The chapter states that “heaven is not just a future experience, pie in the sky after we die but is a present reality.” How do you react to that statement? Has it been true in your own experience?
4. Of the three options – God is everything and everywhere; God is nowhere to be found; and God actively intervenes in our space – which do you find most attractive? Why? Are there any attractive things about the other two?
5. Bishop Hockin claims that he has had “moments that remind me that the spirit world, although distinct and removed from mine, is not really that far away.” Have you had such moments? Describe them.

Questions for Bible Study Exodus 3: 1-12

1. In this encounter between Moses and God can you find the signs Bishop Hockin describes:
 - A clarification of where God is in relation to people and the world?
 - All pride and pretence disappears from Moses – he becomes who he really is?
 - The promise Moses will become something more – a fuller, honest and productive human being?
 - A concern from God that justice be done?
2. How did Moses feel about getting this call?
3. How might you feel if God called you to something similar? In the end Moses went, would you?

Notes

Chapter Four

A Rumour of Trust

Pre-reading reflection:

What are the things or who are the people you trust most in the world? Why?

Can you think of a time when your trust in someone or some thing was badly shaken or violated? What happened and what impact did that have on your levels of trust in the future?

It seems that every time we open our papers or watch the news, we read and see new stories of people at every level losing their trust in leaders of institutions that claimed to be rocks of integrity and honesty. We can start with Wall Street in New York. It was once a very trusted center of world finance. However, if you invested with Bernie Madoff, who had the confidence of people in high circles and defrauded thousands of honest well-meaning people out of billions of dollars, you ended up very disappointed.

It is not only the economic world that has been shaken; a dark, mean shadow has fallen over our political systems as well. For whatever reasons, some deserved and some not, our political leaders have lost the trust of many, that sense of civil security that we once took for granted.

And there are serious questions about some in law enforcement, particularly in those high profile cases where abusive behaviour was caught on cell phone cameras for the

world to see. We again ask the question: “Is there anyone out there that we can trust?”

We don’t need all that many stories of people in positions of trust disappointing us, to drive us into some level of perpetual cynicism. As a result, we lose our taste for politics, our respect for those in authority and we withdraw into ourselves, not knowing if there is anyone at all whom we can trust.

In his recent book, “Can God Be Trusted?”, Father Thomas Williams writes, “It is rightly said that our civilization is undergoing a profound crisis of trust. Look at the way people put off marriage afraid of their infidelity and lack of commitment. In business relationships, too, a simple handshake no longer means anything. Instead, we call on lawyers to draw up airtight agreements.” It has been my experience that for a lot of people, this crisis of trust extends to our thoughts of God. For instance: How is prayer answered? How can we be sure that God is anywhere around when “I pass through the valley of the shadow of death?”

It all begs the question, “Who’s out there to trust with my life or am I on my own?” A cousin once e-mailed this cheery message: “Due to recent budget cuts, loss of workers, the cost of electricity, the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off!” It is against this very culture of cynicism, uncertainty and even fear, that we talk of trusting Someone again.

There is a story in John’s gospel, Chapter Four, about a man who held a good position in one of the royal houses of King Herod in Galilee. He had a son who was terminally ill at his home in Capernaum and the man was frantic. He heard that Jesus of Nazareth was going to be in nearby Cana and went there, a day’s journey on foot, to meet him. According to the text, he came on his knees, “Please come home with me.

Stop and Think

- 1. Can you think of recent incidents where public trusts have been violated?*
- 2. Do these kinds of things cause you to become cynical?*

Touch and heal my son because he's dying." Can you hear the desperation in the man's voice? He didn't know the right words or the right etiquette. He just blurted out his plea. "Please, my son is dying, burning up with a fever. I need a miracle."

After some discussion about signs and wonders, which I'll touch on later, the distraught father pleads again. "Come home before my child dies." Jesus' words to him are plain, challenging, simple, but promising. He says, "You can go home. Your son will live."

I'm not sure what I would do with an answer like that. I would want him to come to my home. I would want to see him stand over my child, lay hands on him where it hurts and say a long, fervent prayer. Maybe splash around a little holy water. I would want him to be there. Isn't that what we all would want in this situation? We want to see the evidence, that moment of divine intervention. "Come home with me, Jesus, make everything right. Then, I will believe."

However, that's not the way it happens in this story. According to the text, "The father took Jesus at his word and left for home." He trusted what Jesus said. At first glance, he got a only a promise, a place to go and a hope. What he really got was a word and he trusted that word of Jesus. In spite of being more than a day away, no cell phones, no e-mail to check it out, all he had was a word and he trusted that word. It was only the next day that a servant meets him on the road and tells him that his son is well.

Stop and Think

1. Do you know anyone who has demonstrated this kind of trust before the evidence is in?

There are three messages we need to draw from this story that will speak to us of trust and how and why we might come to trust someone, again.

The first is about the nature of God. He often keeps us waiting. Certainly, the father who has the son in critical con-

dition does not get that fast-tracked miracle, that long fervent prayer or the holy water. Jesus keeps him waiting. Of course, the healing has happened. We are even given the time of day, 1:00 p.m. The father doesn't know that and has to wait. Trusting and believing mean waiting.

Too often, we in our culture see waiting as a waste of time. The bus is late. There is nothing we can do but it's painful to wait. It is not difficult to understand the irritation people feel when someone tells them to wait in an emergency room in a hospital or for a doctor's appointment. Henri Nouwen, writes, "The secret of waiting is the faith that some seed of goodness has been planted. That something in answer to our prayer has already begun."

Stop and Think

1. Can you think of a time when waiting turned out to be a positive experience for you?

A waiting person is someone who is present in the moment, who believes that now is the moment of God. Again, Father Nouwen claims *"Waiting is the way of courage trusting that there is a spiritual power alive in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced by despair, lostness and darkness. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun. That is the meaning of marriage, the meaning of friendship, community and the Christian life."*

None of these things are fast-tracked miracles. God makes us wait, not as a brainless, passive experience but as an experience of hope. As St. Paul said, (Phillipians 3: 12) "One day I will take hold of that mystery that first took hold of me. And so," he says, "I press on, trusting."

The father in our story had time to wait, at least twenty-four hours. I wonder what was going through his head, what got him through that long night, what made the waiting bearable. I believe that he would have told us that it was the words of Jesus, maybe the way he said them, his tone of voice, his authority, maybe the smile of compassion on

Jesus' face. That's what he was trusting. That's why he could wait.

You and I have access to those same compassionate words, words like: "Don't be afraid, I am with you." "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." "I will never abandon you," "I am with you always." "I go to prepare a place for you and I will take you to be with me forever."

We have to read these words for ourselves. We need to mark them down in our Bibles, trust them and then wait. We don't wait in a vacuum. We are waiting for God and, if we're wise, we can wait with others nurturing one another with these words. That is called "church." It is a place where we hear that word of hope and are given the energy and the grace to hold unto them and to wait for God's promise to come true.

The second message is that there is something more about this God for whom we are waiting. If we were to ask that father something about Jesus' tone of voice, I'm sure that his tone went a long way in helping the man's trust. Not all of us have had an experience of God like that. If we had, it may not have been all that positive.

We may link God with a bad experience of church, a real disappointment with someone who professed faith but never followed through, or worse, violated a trust. Perhaps there's been a tragedy in our lives, a loss that has coloured our view of God.

Dr. William Sloane Coffin, former preacher at Riverside Church in New York, experienced the loss of his 25-year old son in a car accident. Two nights after the accident at a gathering a well-meaning lady said, "Well, I certainly don't understand the will of God." Coffin, very much on the edge of his emotions, responded, "I'll say you don't, lady. Was it the will of God that Alex had windshield wipers that didn't work? That he was driving too fast on slippery roads? That he had a little too much to drink? Can God be blamed for that?" He went on, "When the water covered my son's head, God's heart was the first to break."

Later as Dr. Coffin reflected on the mystery of God's place in human suffering, he wrote, "I have come to believe that God provides minimum protection but maximum support." In some circles, that may be a controversial saying, but I find it mature and hopeful. This statement is not rooted in an interventionist god who picks up the brokenness of our lives every time and does it quickly, but a God whose will is known through relationships through time and patience. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But, when you are, he will also provide a way out so that you will be able to stand strong." (1 Corinthians 10: 13)

Therefore, the third message we need to hear is that only through relationships can we experience that support. If we limit God to those big moments, or big activities, a view that keeps him safely at a distance, we never do experience that other dimension of support, of being carried, of being loved.

This is what Jesus is talking about in this story in John 4 when he decries the need for signs and wonders in order to believe. He's talking about a protectionist God, not a supportive- come-alongside kind of God. Trusting in God means trusting more in the maximum support and that for a lot of us has meant getting a lot closer to this God, letting him share our pain rather than eliminate it. Miracles are limited, says Jesus in John 4: 48; trust is unlimited in its ability to carry us. Jesus says, "Unless you see miracles, you will not believe."

Frederick Beuchner, preacher and writer, tells the story of sitting parked by the roadside terribly depressed and afraid for his very ill daughter and how it was affecting his family. Out of nowhere, a car went slowly by with a license plate that bore a crucial word on it, the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that he needed most to see. The word was Trust. "What do you call that kind of moment?" he asks. "Is it something to laugh off? Or was it the word of God? Whatever it was, it was for me a great gift." The owner of the car turned

out to be the trust officer in a local bank. He was not God. “For me,” says Beuchner, “he was a messenger of God who later brought the plate to my house where it sits as something as valuable as anything I own.”

Dr. Samuel Johnson once wrote, “It is better to suffer wrong than to do it and happier to be sometimes cheated than not to trust.” We do live in a world where it is too often increasingly difficult to trust but trust we must, taking Jesus at his word and recognizing not the quick fix in it but a deep profound hope. As Beuchner maintained, “Faith is not always about knowing where you’re going but it’s going anyway.”

We are challenged with many questions. Who can I really trust with the rest of my life? Can I trust the stock markets of the world to deliver the security I really need? Can I trust human science to come up with that miracle that will heal my every ill? Can I trust all those good people around me to always say and do the right thing? Or, do I need someone else, someone like the one who told the father that his sick son would be well? He just had to wait. He had to trust him, take him at his word. Who do you trust with the rest of your life?

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. Bishop Hockin quotes Father Thomas Williams who argues “our civilization is undergoing a profound crisis of trust.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Do you think there is a difference between a healthy scepticism and a more negative cynicism? What might that difference be? How can we foster the former without sliding into the latter?
3. Have you found God or the church to be trustworthy?
4. Bishop Hockin writes that God’s actions on our behalf do not always come when we want or in the ways we expect. Have you experienced this? Can you share some of those experiences?
5. Have you, like Dr. Coffin, ever found those unexpected, and sometimes unwelcomed, circumstances have provided opportunities for a fuller experience of God?
6. Reflecting on his family tragedy Dr. Coffin wrote, “I have come to believe that God provides minimum protection but maximum support.” Has this been true in your life?
7. Many people and institutions do not seem to be trustworthy in our contemporary world. How can we become people who are trustworthy and how can we build communities of trust?

Questions for Bible Study John 4:43-54

1. Why did the Galileans welcome Jesus to the region?
2. How does the official's request fit this orientation?
3. What is Jesus' response to the desire of people to see signs, to experience miracles?
4. Have you ever regarded God as primarily a provider of blessings and been disappointed in him when he does not come through?
5. If not miracles and signs, what should be the basis for our faith?
6. Bishop Hockin argues that Jesus' delay in responding and his simple instructions to return home might have irritated the father. How would you respond in similar circumstances?
7. In the end the father acts in faith before any obvious signs are given, what is the outcome of this faith?
8. Are there steps of faith Jesus is calling you to take?

Notes

Notes

Part Two – *Rumours in December*

Chapter Five

The Winter of the Soul

Pre-reading reflection:

Have you ever experienced a time of emptiness or despair?

What were its symptoms and how did you react to it?

Where did you find comfort?

Someone has written, “The Winter of my soul is here. My heart is frosted o’er with fear of regrets regarding yester-year.”

Of all the seasons of the year winter, at least in most of Canada, is the longest season. It is accompanied by colder temperatures, less sunshine, ice and snow. It begins in November. It ends in April. Likewise the winter of the soul is no picnic. It is that time in our spiritual lives when energy fades, when we have more questions and doubts. It could be a time of depression, loss of hope, someone close to us is perhaps ill and we may not be feeling all that well ourselves. Our prayers may get few answers. We go to church. We listen hard. We do our best but inspiration is hard to find.

It might be a time when we withdraw from our friends and isolate ourselves from God. We use the analogy of winter to

describe what is going on in life. We may say, “We are snowed under with worry and work.” We speak of getting cold feet, afraid and anxious. It is interesting that the spiritual authors, that I read and enjoy most, are all women and men who have experienced the “winter of their souls” and can write about it. Henri Nouwen, Philip Yancey, Mother Theresa and Brennan Manning are all people who know the spiritual winter and come through it discovering some things do grow better in winter. Although I don’t know who said it, I’ve always found the expression, “grace grows better in winter” a source of great hope. Accessing this grace is what I want to discuss in this chapter. However, before we get there, we must examine more deeply and personally what these winter times of the soul can do.

Stop and Think

- 1. Do you think everyone experiences times of spiritual winter?*
- 2. Does it help to know this is a common experience?*

It’s safe to say that none of us over forty have escaped a brush with this spiritual winter. We experience a loss, a disappointment, someone lets us down, we lose a friendship or someone dies. As it says in the book of Job, “There is this place of secret wounds and silent cries.” In all these experiences we can react in different ways. One way is to move into a state of denial and say to ourselves: “This isn’t happening to me.” In order to avoid the pain, we bury it deep in the spiritual snows of our soul.

In the Globe and Mail awhile ago, there was an opinion piece written by a young man who had lost his mother in a car accident. He was quite young and unwilling or unable to handle the pain. After ten years he finally got the courage to visit his mother’s grave. It was a very emotional time for him. He said, “I cried for an hour. I was depressed and angry but more importantly I was overwhelmed. I thought that ‘time could heal all wounds’. I found out that wounds only heal if allowed to breathe and see daylight every once in awhile. I realized that

my wound tightly wrapped, bound and hidden as mine, remains as fresh as ever untouched by the passage of time. But my bandage had finally been ripped off. For the first time, I was healing.” Now that is winter stuff. The young man doesn’t mention it in spiritual terms but it is a very spiritual experience. What I’m suggesting is that when we get brushed by these winter time events, it’s much easier to bury them, let the snows of life and busyness cover them up, which they will for awhile. Unfortunately, the hurt is not diminished with time. It lies there, waiting for time to be uncovered and scream at us again.

Stop and Think

- 1. Have you ever tried to bury hurt or despair?*
- 2. Did that work for you?*

The second symptom of this winter of the soul is a fear of making any necessary changes. As the poem said, “My heart is frosted o’er with fear.” To use another seasonal word, we get “stuck” in what we’re comfortable with. We can understand how this happens. In times of stress, doubt and uncertainty all we have energy to do is to hold on to what we know. Many of our churches these days are going through a winter time. Membership is in decline. There is anger and frustration. Younger people are going somewhere else. There is a cry from one side for a change and the other side urges us to hold on to what we have. This comes out of fear, fear of losing what little is left in favour of risking our lives for something uncertain. Winter for the soul is this dark and dangerous time when it’s easy to bury things, to get stuck in memories that may not be good for us at all but we’re afraid of change.

Stop and Think

- 1. Have you seen churches go through these kinds of experiences?*
- 2. How were they manifest?*

How can God’s grace grow in winter? It’s always been a marvel to me that the Christian Church in the second century declared that the birth of Christ should be celebrated scarcely

four days into the official season of winter. That the Son of God, Light of the World, Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace should be born not on a sunny, warm June day, not on a holiday weekend in August but in the darkest, coldest and lifeless time of the year. “The Blind Boys of Alabama”, in one of their Christmas albums, sing an old spiritual song called, “The Last Month of the Year”. The lyrics are simple but they imply that somehow God waited until the year was almost over in this dark time. Never did he disappoint, abandon or forget his people. The Messiah came; Jesus was born in the last month of the year.

In that wonderful act of incarnation, God takes on our winter, takes on all the darkness and the coldness of our broken and fallen nature. “God lit a candle in the night. The candle glowed and gave us light.” God entered our world, as Job described it, “in a place of secret and silent cries.” He comes as a vulnerable child, born in the stable on some backstreet in Bethlehem in the last month of the year.

The good news for those of us who go through this winter of the soul is that we are never alone in this winter. God is with us. We have this God who emptied himself and took on the form of a servant thereby entering our world of “secret and silent cries.” As Isaiah said, “Though darkness covered the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, yet I will be to you an everlasting light.”

There is an old story told of a sheep herder in Wyoming. He writes to the famed conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Toscanini: “Dear Mr. Toscanini: Each Sunday night I enjoy listening to your concerts on the radio from New York. It’s awful lonely out here in winter with no one to talk to. My only comfort is my battery radio and my old fiddle. In winter I’m not able to go to town and I’m afraid my battery radio will die before spring. This means that my only comfort will be my fiddle. However, it desperately needs a tuning. Would you be so kind as to sound the note “A” next Sunday,

so that I can be sure that my fiddle is up to standard pitch? Thank you very much.”

The following Sunday, the CBS radio announcer read the letter over the air and said, “Now, ladies and gentlemen, for our listener in Wyoming, here is the note ‘A.’” Thousands of listeners could visualize this man in cold Wyoming, with his fiddle under his chin tuning it with the orchestra in New York thousands of miles away.

Jesus comes into the winters of our discontent, touching these secret wounds and silent cries with an offer to retune our lives, retune our humanity, retune our values and relationships so that we may discover a new harmony in a world of dissonance and discord. His offer is to bring a healing for those lonesome cries. God in his gracious love enters the dark and cold places of our places, takes on himself our winter and then proceeds to show us a better way.

Just as Christmas comes in wintertime, the last month of the year, so Lent as well, that Christian season before Easter, begins in winter. Lent is the road to spring and new life. It begins on a Wednesday after Pancake Tuesday, usually in late February. It comes as an announcement that winter for the soul is never a permanent state. If you have the humility and the sorrow to admit to those hidden wounds and secret cries, then new life is never that far away.

St. Theresa of Lysieux once wrote in a letter, “If you are willing to serenely bear the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter.” If, like the man in his story in *The Globe and Mail*, instead of our wounds being tightly wrapped, bound and hidden, they finally get ripped off and are allowed to breathe. We call this repentance (or remorse for our sins) and it is only then that healing begins. I remember Henri Nouwen, in one of his little prayers, writing, “To me, O Lord, your stumbling friend, show your mercy.

There are two instruments in our quest to overcome winter in our souls. As mentioned in the last chapter, they are

trust and waiting. We've all heard the story of the man who falls over a cliff hanging on for dear life to a fragile branch. "Please someone help me." A voice gently says, "Yes, I'll help you. Just let go." There's a pause and the man says, "Is there anyone else up there to help me?"

Trust is hard. Father Thomas Williams, in a new book called, "Can God Be Trusted?" subtitled "Finding Faith in Troubled Times" takes on, in the first few chapters, what he calls the deficit of trust in our current culture. He writes, "We are raised with a mentality of self-help and self-reliance. We learn to do things ourselves, to think for ourselves, to solve our own problems. We are critical and questioning, reasonable and autonomous. Our movies and television stories teem" he says, "with models of this sort, models of people who take on the system alone, the lone vigilante who brings criminals to justice, who stop at nothing, journalists who dig and dig until they unearth the true story.

In all these cases, the system is corrupt. Those in authority are liars and we get the message over and over. Trust no one but yourself." So, in such a world, when some spiritual winter buries you with disappointment and loneliness, it is never easy to trust and to trust God.

Stop and Think

1. How would you answer Father Williams' question – "Can God be trusted?"

Yet, I know of no other way to get out of winter. In the gospel story that John recounted in his last chapter, he says, "And the man believed in Jesus' word, trusted him and went home." Naive? Out of touch with reality? Or, the only thing that you can do is trust. Hard but good.

The second thing that we need to do is to wait. Eugene Kennedy, a journalist in Boston, has a chapter in his little book, "Free to be Human" called "Waiting for Spring." He observes, "The price of hope fulfilled in spring is our readiness to face the deaths and losses multiplied mercilessly in the

winters of our lives. Waiting gives us time to do that. Gives us time to learn what faith is all about.

Following knee surgery some summers ago, I was faced with three or four months before I would be able to walk again. The first book that presented itself to me was “The Seven Spiritual Gift of Waiting.” It was the last thing I wanted to read. I didn’t want to wait. Everything inside me rebelled against waiting but waiting I had to do. Believe it or not, I did discover that there are gifts to be had when we wait. Grace does grow better in winter.

Winter for the soul is a dark, cold and lonely time. It is a dangerous time when we try to bury those secret wounds and silent cries but it is also the very time when Jesus comes and enters those winter experiences, embraces it and lives it himself in order to get close to us with his light, his warmth and his love. As well as Christmas, we are given this road, this crack, this tunnel, this way out of a spiritual winter. It is a way paved with signs of hope and all we need do is trust and wait. The miracle of spring will come.

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. Bishop Hockin writes, "It's safe to say that none of us over forty have escaped a brush with this spiritual winter." Do you think this is true? Can you share some of your own brushes with spiritual winter?
2. The chapter includes the story of a young man who tried to bury the hurt of his mother's death only to find himself buried in despair until he allowed his wounds "to breathe and see daylight every once in a while." Is it necessary to expose our hurts and share them with others in order for healing to come?
3. Our culture, Bishop Hockin claims, fosters individualism and teaches self-reliance. It is not a good idea, we are told, to trust others especially with our vulnerabilities. Have you found the church to be like the wider culture in this or different? How can we foster communities of care and healing?
4. Do you find it easy or hard to trust God? Why?
5. St. John of the Cross described spiritual winter as "the dark night of the soul". How does Jesus conclude his prayer?
6. Bishop Hockin writes that the "dark night of the soul" is often a time when we learn much from God and about God. Have you found this to be so? Are these dark and dry times necessary for spiritual growth?

Questions for Bible Study Matthew 26: 36-45

1. Why has Jesus gone to the garden?
2. Why has he taken some disciples with him?
3. What is his state of mind? Why?
4. Have you ever found God leading you in a direction you did not want to go?
5. How did you react? How does Jesus?
6. How do his disciples respond to the situation?
7. Have you ever found yourself sorrowful and troubled and had both friends and God seem to let you down?
8. What might we learn from this passage about how to help those experiencing darkness and despair?
9. In those situations are you able, like Jesus, to trust yourself to God's will?
10. The writer to the Hebrews says we should find comfort in the fact that our saviour shared our human experience of loneliness, despair, and temptation. Is this a comfort to you? How so?

Notes

Chapter Six

Shopping for a Messiah

Pre-reading reflection:

In your experience is interest in God and/or spiritual things increasing or decreasing in the world today? What evidence leads you to that view?

What are the qualities of a good leader?

One of the great activities that mark the consumerist age is the activity of shopping. Malls, stores and plazas have grown up as answers to that search. Much of the print in our daily newspapers is taken up by massive advertisements capitalizing on this urge to consume. The weeks leading up to Christmas are the heaviest shopping times of our year.

As well, there is another kind of shopping going on. In spite of a culture that seems so often to marginalize religion in

general and Christianity in particular, despite the recent waves of aggressive atheism, perhaps more people than ever before are searching for something that the humanist, secular world does not provide. In a previous chapter I made the distinction between a life lived by thing and function and a life lived by transcendence and intimacy. Many people at every stage of life identify themselves in terms of thing

Stop and Think

- 1. Have you seen evidence of dissatisfaction with the accumulation of things?*
- 2. How about in your own life, do you yearn for something more?*

and function i.e. what they have and what they do. When you ask them about their story, the questions revolve around where they live, how well they live and their profession. However, the other choice in life is transcendence and intimacy. People are becoming aware that life ought to mean more than the things we have and the jobs we do. The things of the spirit and deeper friendship are what real living is about.

For a lot of people, be they younger, middle-aged or seniors, this is a wake-up call that there just may be another world out there that offers a meaning to life that may have been totally missed. As a result, people go on a search and their search takes them in many directions. Some go “east” and line up by the thousands to hear the Dali Lama speak. Others take trips to exotic places and learn how to meditate and read the ancient writings of eastern mysticism. Still others are taking a second look at the Christian tradition and all its varieties, thinking that, although their parents have been disillusioned by it all, they might have been very wrong.

Some years ago, a young woman in her early twenties showed up at one of my confirmation classes. She’d walked by the church and seen the invitation on a sign to come. “I’m not sure I believe in God,” she confessed, “but there’s an emptiness I feel and I’m on a search.” She told me that her father had no time for the church and even when passing a church building, he would comment, “There’s where the losers go.” The young woman continued, “But Daddy lost his job a little while ago and is in great despair and doesn’t know what to do with himself. I need a better way to cope with a crisis than he has.” This woman was on a shopping spree for a Messiah and she is not alone.”

Stop and Think

1. Have you seen examples of people moved by crisis to seek God?

Dr. Charles Taylor, one of Canada’s great philosophers and thinkers, in his major book, “A Secular Age”, traces the rise of secularism and its challenge to religion over the past

centuries. He observes, "We are now, in this first decade of the twentieth century, in a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee. . . Many young people are looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity and spiritual depth. This often springs from a profound dissatisfaction with life, finding it empty, flat and devoid of higher purpose." He refers to it as a "spirituality of quest" and those on the quest as "pilgrim seekers".

A few months ago, I "googled" Messiah. The first item to come up was a BBC television series from Northern Ireland called, "The Messiah". It was the story of a police detective dealing with crime in Belfast. He is a rather aggressive character who gets the job done and the bad guys are put in prison. Some of the titles of the episodes are telling, "The Reckoning", "The Rapture", "Vengeance is Mine", all language with certain rather scary religious overtones. But the origin of Messiah is a concept born in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament.

Throughout the story of God's people from Genesis through the prophets, there is this hope of a charismatic leader who would come and deliver them from their captivity. We see such figures as Moses, Samson, Saul and David, all men who gave to this messianic hope some of its substance and character. As the story develops and God's people experience invasion, conquest, exile and humiliation, there also develops mixed voices on just what the Messiah, the anointed one, might be. Certainly, many would be very comfortable with the Messiah of Belfast image, the strong man who gets the job done, a man of retribution who brings resolution and does so with some flair.

But, there is another image of Messiah that is very different developing in the writings of the prophets, mainly Isaiah and Jeremiah. In his early chapters, Isaiah speaks of a "child being born and of the government on his shoulders", that he is "wonderful counsellor" and "prince of peace". In later chap-

ters of Isaiah he refers to this messianic figure as the “suffering servant” of the Lord, unlike the macho image of other sources. The prophet writes, “He grew up like a tender shoot. He had no beauty or majesty. He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53).

In the hundred or so years before the time of Jesus of Nazareth, there were many figures in Jewish history that rose up as a messianic figure for the Jewish people. Probably the best known was Judas Maccabeus, who in the second century B.C.E. in a stunning victory over the Greek occupiers, rid Jerusalem of this alien force. The Jewish festival Hanukkah remembers that event. Most of these Messiahs were of the warrior Davidic type and so consequently when Jesus of Nazareth appears on the scene and talk of him takes on a messianic flavour, you can guess that people had conflicting ideas of what he might do.

If you know the story in the Gospels and how he presents himself, this Messiah is neither Samson nor Judah Maccabeus. Although he comes from the line of David, he is no warrior king. In Luke, Chapter 20, Jesus seems to distance himself from that messianic heritage. He says, “How is it that the Pharisees say that the Messiah is son of David. David, in the Psalms, calls him ‘Lord’. How then can he be his son?”

Stop and Think

1. Do you think Christianity might be more appealing if Jesus had come more in the mould of a warrior king?

Of the two messianic images in the scriptures, it is clear which ones Jesus chooses as his. It is that of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. After his death and resurrection as the church started to proclaim him as Messiah, it becomes clear which scriptures they used to support their claim. In Jesus’ own words, “The son of man must suffer much, be rejected and killed and rise the third day.”

In the first chapter of John’s gospel there is an account of a group of young men who are on a search for a Messiah.

They were followers of John the Baptist. John, one day, points them to Jesus of Nazareth, and says, “You need to take a look at him. I believe he is the Lamb of God, a reference to an image of sacrifice and service.” Later, two of these young searchers spent time with Jesus. John says it was all day until 4:00 p.m. in the afternoon. One of the searchers was Andrew, who runs and finds his brother, Peter, and boldly proclaims, “We have found the Messiah.” Other friends of theirs hear the news and by the next day three more encounter Jesus. By that afternoon they are saying, “Rabbi Jesus, you are the son of God and king of Israel.”

John does not record much of the conversations between them or what Jesus said but we can bet they had nothing to do with political strategy or how to use a sword. We can imagine they talked more about God and his gracious love for them and all humanity. As the months passed for these young followers of Jesus, I’m sure they were amazed by what they saw. Lives were changed, broken lives were put together again and people were finding forgiveness and hope. There were no strategy sessions on how to take over government or how to get rid of an occupying power.

But, what was Jesus’ strategy with people? When you look for it, it’s amazing how many times he gets people together for a meal. He is a Messiah who “does lunch”. He also “does dinner” with a lot of people.” I like that! He feeds

Stop and Think

1. What lessons might there be in the ways Jesus dealt with people for the mission of the church?

five thousand in a lovely green park and sends them home with leftovers. He has lunch with Mary and Martha in their home in Bethany. He has dinner with Zaccheus. He tells the story of a great banquet, another of killing a fatted calf and having a party and then, of course, he has the Last Supper.

In those first century days in Jewish culture sharing meals carried deep religious and social significance. You were

judged by the company you kept. If you valued your reputation as a good person, you never had a meal with anyone with a questionable history. That is why Jesus was often criticized for eating and drinking with “tax collectors and sinners” something that he insisted on doing. Any Messiah who was trying to promote himself as a warrior leader would have been far more selective in his choice of table companions but this Messiah was very different.

There are four observations from these table experiences that not only tell us a lot about Jesus himself but also what might attract us to him in a new and exciting way.

The first is about relationship. When you sit with someone at table, you get to know them. This was the Messiah’s number one agenda. It would be through relationships not through rules and regulations that Jesus would bring redemption and a new grace to peoples’ lives. He said in John’s gospel to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants, I call you friends.” Part of the relationship at table is that you are all sitting more or less on the same level. There is no talk here of any head table. As a matter of fact, Jesus warns his followers about having eyes on the chief seats at a banquet. “No, no,” he says, “take the lower seat.”

When Zaccheus and Jesus were at dinner (Luke 19), there was a relationship being established and change happened there. Zaccheus comes away from that meal saying that he would give half of his possessions to the poor and he would pay back four times if he had cheated anyone. That is transformation. A lot of us in church can have a relationship with the institution or the pastor or the history or the music but all that is secondary to, as St. Paul says, knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Secondly, we find out from the table experiences that it is about community. We seldom eat at a banquet alone. Christianity is not just a one on one experience. It is also a social community experience. Earlier, I wrote of a young

woman and her search for God. In the confirmation class of this group of seekers, she said, “If only I could have my questions answered first, then I could believe in God.” Another seeker in the group quickly responded, “But that’s not the way it happens, Carol.” he said, “You need to believe first and then the questions get answered or don’t seem to matter anymore.” When that young woman was baptized a few weeks later, she wasn’t alone. Her thirteen friends were with her supporting and encouraging her in her new faith. Her experience was partly about community; many people on a spiritual quest looking together for God.

Thirdly, people at a meal get fed. This sounds rather obvious but the one thing I hear frequently from people on this search is that they’re looking for a message, a man, a Messiah that will feed their empty, hungry souls. Today’s pilgrim seekers are looking for depth, transcendence, personal significance and often something meaningful to do. They long for acceptance and forgiveness and a friend on the journey. It’s not by chance that Jesus on the night before he dies gathers his disciples around a table and through bread and wine offers himself as the nurture and nourishment for their spiritual lives. A wise priest once said to me that three things nourish him: the story, the silence and the bread. “Always the same,” he said, “consistent ‘take home’ for the journey.”

Finally, in many of these meal gatherings in the New Testament, it is by invitation that people belong. Today’s pilgrim seeker in the search for a Messiah needs to know that they’re invited at least by this Messiah to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” There is no skill-testing question. It’s necessary only to know your own needs and your own hunger. One of Jesus’ parables speaks about a banquet where the best people were invited. The tables were set, the best china was in place, the five course meal was ready to be served but none of the invited guests showed up. They all had excuses. One said, “Well, I’m sorry, man, but I’ve just bought a new home.

It has a water view and my wife and I need to go out and see it.” Another said, “I’m busy with my career. I love it. It takes twelve hours a day. It comes first.” Another said in an e-mail, “I just got married. Doesn’t family come first?”

The host, understandably upset, sends another set of invitations out. This time they went to the poor who have no property, the crippled who can’t work and the lame and the blind whom nobody wants to marry. Surprise, surprise they all come. Perhaps what is happening now is that your pilgrim seeker has had it with things and work and even family because they don’t satisfy at a deeper level. They are hungry for what matters.

As Charles Taylor says, “We are at the beginning of a new age of religious searching.” People are shopping for a Messiah and this is a Messiah who desires relationship, who invites you to community and who feeds you with the bread of life and oh, by the way, “wraps that blanket around your shoulders and whispers hope, acceptance and forgiveness into your sagging heart and asks you to simply trust him.”

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. Do you have experience with people (perhaps yourself) looking for meaning in the wrong places? Can you share something of that?
2. In commenting on the state of Germany in the devastating depression and political turmoil of the 1930s, Eric Metaxas wrote, "Many Germans longed for a return to some kind of leadership and were increasingly less fussy about that kind of leadership it should be. They wanted leadership itself, and a leader who would lead!" Have you ever found yourself wishing for 'stronger' leadership from political or religious leaders? What, for you, makes a good leader? Does Jesus fit the bill? Why or why not?
3. Jesus followers were often confused or frustrated by his leadership style, can you understand why? What were they expecting?
4. Bishop Hockin writes that there are four elements important to the way Jesus connected with people: relationship, community, nourishment, and invitation. How does your church measure up on these elements? How about your own practice? How can we as individuals and Christian communities better incorporate these elements into our practice?

Questions for Bible Study Mark 10: 35-41

1. What request does James and John make of Jesus?
2. Why do you suppose they made this request?
3. How does Jesus respond?
4. How do the other disciples respond? Can you blame them?
5. What are the contrasting pictures of leadership that Jesus draws?
6. Which has more general appeal in the world today?
7. Which does he advocate?
8. Do you know any examples of servant leadership? What are they?
9. How might you demonstrate servant leadership in your community, work or family life?
10. How might the church demonstrate servant leadership in the community?

Chapter Seven

Bonuses for Those Who Don't Deserve Them

Pre-reading reflection:

What is the most generous thing ever done for you? What made it so meaningful for you?

What is the most generous thing you have ever done? What motivated you to do it?

Central to the way we celebrate Christmas and the weeks leading up to it is the emphasis on being generous with others especially those in critical need. Starting in early November our mailboxes are full of requests from charities and foundations asking for support. We see the Salvation Army kettles on the streets and in the malls. World Vision reminds us that we can help a poor family in Nicaragua by buying them a chicken or two. As well, our churches have many projects raising money for the poor and needy. In the Anglican tradition, we used to have what we called “White Gift Sunday” which involved gifts, wrapped in white tissue paper, brought by families on the third Sunday before Christmas to be distributed to those in need.

Along with that, of course, is the tradition of gift giving to our loved ones and friends. Throughout the Christian world giving gifts and helping the needy have long been a part of how we celebrate Christmas. This began, perhaps, with the

story of the Wise Men who brought gifts to the baby Jesus and the story of St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra in the fourth century, who would distribute gifts to the poor.

Even deeper than these traditions has been the call of the scriptures to those who believe, that being generous with other people is an essential act of faith. In Isaiah, Chapter 58, God tells us “to loosen the chains of injustice, to share your bread with the hungry, to provide shelter to the wanderer.” In the New Testament Jesus is heard to say, “There is more blessing in giving than in receiving.” In his parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25) he says, “In as much as you do something good for the least of these, you do it to me.” I’ve never been in a Christian church on a Sunday morning that missed that moment of great solemnity when the plate is passed and we’re called to be generous. As the priest or pastor reminds us, “God loves a cheerful giver”.

Stop and Think

- 1. Have you found more blessing in giving than receiving? How so?*
- 2. Are you a cheerful or reluctant giver?*

During the financial crisis of 2008/2009, the attention of many people and more particularly the media was on the reporting of the world’s financial meltdown. Part of the reporting involved stories of Wall Street traders and company CEO’s receiving over-the-top personal bonuses approved by Boards of Directors, which ran in the millions of dollars. Meanwhile, the companies themselves were nearing bankruptcy, a crucial detail often hidden from the shareholders. To many people this was a ridiculous scandal. I remember hearing that these bonuses in 2007 alone exceeded what the United States was giving in foreign aid to Africa during that same period of time. Hundreds of millions of dollars would be involved.

I don’t know if any of you ever received a bonus, a little extra take-home for a job well done. In a small town parish where I served some years ago, the week before my first

Christmas, a knock came at the door and there stood the church warden with a big smile on his face. “Rector,” he said, “I’m bringing you your Christmas bonus, a turkey and a Christmas tree, for a job well done.” I was impressed and grateful. Although we already had a tree up and decorated, the turkey was great. Bonuses are usually a little extra something as a reward for a job well done. These were never excessive or negotiated; just a way of telling an employee that they were valued.

In this chapter we are talking about bonuses for those who never get them and many who never deserve them. This is a kind of giving and generosity that never thinks about what the recipient deserves, how well they’ve done or how good they’ve been but they get the bonus anyway. It is a way of saying to people “You are valued.” All of us remember as children being told that Santa would come to our house if we were good, which translated meant eat your carrots or clean up your room, otherwise there would be piece of coal in your stocking. It was a well-meant method that parents used to keep us in line in those days of December. However, it was always linked to good behaviour.

But here, however, we are talking about bonuses that do not come as a reward but as a gift with no strings attached. It’s a way of telling someone they are valued. I once heard the distinction between charity and generosity. Charity is a kind of “one-off” or occasional gift to a person or cause we choose to support. Generosity, on the other hand, is a lifestyle choice to give and doesn’t depend on the worthiness of the recipient but an act that comes from a generous heart, an act of grace.

Eugene Kennedy, in his little book “Free to be Human” defines what he calls a big-hearted person, “Unselfconscious givers respond to others more than to themselves. Big-hearted people have learned to give up something of themselves in order to make room for other people in their lives. There is no loving nor generous giving except by those who have been willing to face down their own selfishness and try to pry open the grasping

hand that would close only on their own concerns.” Although most of us would love those words in our obituary or carved on our tombstone, we struggle with restrictions and controls on our generosity. Sometimes we are afraid to be too generous. After all, there are many causes out there. “Which ones are most deserving?” we say.

Dave Toycen, president and C.E.O. of World Vision Canada, who represents the organization who sends you that catalogue every year with creative gifts for people in the developing world, wrote a book called “The Power of Generosity”. In that book he writes, “I’ve chosen generosity as the topic of my book because I believe it touches every relationship on a daily basis. It is the lubricant that smooths our daily living in a way that affects every other moral virtue. In fact, I believe that generosity is the first car in the train of virtues. Without it, the other virtues, compassion and kindness, are unlikely to ever get started or to be fully expressed.

Mr. Toycen tells the story of being in Kosovo during the war with Serbia. He interviewed a ten-year-old refugee who, while boarding a farm wagon to escape the invading soldiers, was struck on the arm by a rifle butt. His arm was broken and he lost consciousness. However, he and his mother found their way to Albania and safety. “I found this little boy,” writes Toycen, “in a gymnasium crowded in with other people afraid and homeless. As I talked to him I noticed a small package of tin foil in his good hand. Earlier, church groups had distributed presents to the children. With a child’s spontaneity, this traumatized little boy opened his hand, peeled back the foil, broke a piece of choco-

Stop and Think

1. *Who is the most “big-hearted” person you know?*
2. *What makes them that way?*

Stop and Think

1. *Have you ever been caught off guard by the generosity of someone in need?*
2. *What were the circumstances?*

late in two and offered me one of the pieces. I was caught off guard by this act of generosity, his smile had brought me to tears”, admits Toycen.

There is a story in John’s gospel that tells the tale of a selfless, excessive act of generosity. You may remember the account of a man named Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. He had two sisters, Martha and Mary. They decide to throw a dinner party to honour of Jesus and thank him for the return of their brother. I imagine this was no “take-out” sort of thing, probably a rather lavish affair.

The twelve disciples along with a few close friends were there and were having a wonderful time. Just before coffee was to be served, Mary, one of the sisters, brings out about half a litre of very expensive perfume, something used about a dab at a time on special occasions. The story tells us that she uncorked the bottle and pours the whole thing over Jesus’ feet and then proceeds to dry them with her hair. Everyone at the meal was caught off guard by this sudden unscripted act of generosity. It says in the story that the scent filled the room and probably lingered for weeks. It could probably be detected blocks away. There must have been a stunned silence as people took in this scene, which was eventually broken by the voice of reason and thrift. “What a waste,” says Judas. Although he said it, others may have been thinking it.

Here we have the conflict in which a lot of us find ourselves. We struggle with the desire to be kind and generous versus the need to be practical and cost-effective. But Mary did it on an impulse of love. It says in the text, “Martha had served the meal.” Perhaps, Mary in a desire to show Jesus how she felt acted on this impulse to value him. After Judas preached his little cost-effective sermon, Jesus comments, “Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing for me.” It is very clear that Jesus accepts Mary’s act of generosity because he saw love in it. Throughout the New Testament, we see God in Jesus acting in very generous, extravagant

ways. At the wedding at Cana, he produces new wine for the reception, not just a few litres, but a thousand bottles of your best Pinot Noir. In many of Jesus parables there is this high level of generosity, i.e. to a boy who messes up his life and comes to his father who says to him, “Quick, bring the best.” There is also the story of the man who was robbed, beaten up and left in a ditch to die when a good Samaritan comes along, dresses his wounds and takes him to a Howard Johnson’s, stays with him and even pays the bill. Both these stories show value for another human being neither of whom could ever pay them back.

It is a way of acting and living that many of us struggle with. Biblical scholar, Walter Bruggeman, writing in the 1990’s said, “The fact is that the majority of the world’s resources flow into North America and we grow wealthier and wealthier. We hardly notice our own prosperity over the poverty of so many others. The great contradiction is that we have more and more things and less and less generosity.” That is why this act of Mary with her perfume is seen so off-the-wall and wasteful by some but certainly accepted by Jesus. For him, it reflected the goodness and the big-heartedness of the God that he knew. As Eugene Kennedy observes, “A person who is willing to face down their own self-interest and make room in their hearts for others – that is the big-hearted person.” In all of these illustrations there seems to be one common goal and that is a statement about the value of the recipients, people who seldom, if ever, have any hope of a blessing in this harsh and bitter world.

In a culture that is increasingly stripped of grace, where every good thing is negotiated and carries a price tag, we need to hear other voices – the voice of that young boy from Kosovo, the voice of Mary of Bethany, the voice of Jesus speaking to us of a radical generosity of soul, a generosity that gives and gives with no strings attached.

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. Bishop Hockin writes “that being generous with other people is an essential act of faith.” Do you think this is true? Is generosity an essential part of Christian faith? Is that emphasized in the teaching you encounter in church?
2. Have you ever received a bonus? What for? How did it make you feel?
3. Have you ever seen someone get a bonus they really didn’t deserve? How did that make you feel?
4. Bishop Hockin makes a distinction between charity which he describes as a “one off” and generosity which he describes as “a lifestyle choice to give and doesn’t depend on the worthiness of the recipient.” How do you respond to this distinction? What category would you put your own giving in?
5. Dave Toycen calls generosity “the first car in the train of virtues” and argues that all other virtues flow from it. Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. Bishop Hockin claims, “we struggle with the desire to be kind and generous versus the need to be practical and cost effective.” Has this been a struggle for you? How so?
7. Walter Bruggeman writes “that we have more and more things and less and less generosity.” What can we do to make ourselves and our churches more “big-hearted?”

Questions for Bible Study John 12: 1-9

1. Have you ever seen an act of generosity that you thought foolish or misplaced? Why did you feel that way?
2. Who are the characters in this story and how are they related to Jesus?
3. What was Mary's act and what motivated it?
4. What was Judas' response to this act? What was his motivation?
5. If you had been there, how do you think you might have responded?
6. What is Jesus' response to Mary's critics?
7. What are we to make of his claim that we'll always have the poor with us? Does that mean we should give up on working to end poverty?
8. Mary was responding in gratitude for Jesus raising her brother from the dead. What has Jesus done for you? What has been your response?

Chapter Eight

Switching the Price Tags

Pre-reading reflection:

What are the most valuable things in your life? Why?

Looking around, what do you think our culture values most?

What evidence causes you to think that?

Christian writer, Tom Campola, relates the story about the time when he and his friends as youngsters in Philadelphia planned, as a Hallowe'en prank, to break into the local five and dime store and overnight switch all the price tags on items in the store. Consequently, in the morning people could buy a toaster for ten cents and candy for a dollar. The subtitle of that book is, "To Get the Most out of Life, We Must Put First Things First", and it argues that our values and the values in our culture have slid tragically and that we now have difficulty distinguishing what should be most important from what should be least. Campola also explains how culture plays up the value of some lives and plays down the value of others.

Stop and Think

1. *Do we really live in a "me-first consumerist culture"?*
2. *What are the signs of this?*

The point of this chapter is that in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, we have someone who comes into our culture with a message of what and who is really important; who comes into our "kingdom of thingdom", this me-first consumerist culture, and declares "You've got this all wrong. The high

price tags are on all the wrong items and I want to show you what is really valuable.”

I don't know how many of you saw the You-Tube video of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus being presented in a large mall near St. Catharine's, Ontario, in November, 2010. It was video-taped on a Saturday around noon, where shoppers had gathered in a food court for lunch. Suddenly a young female soprano, with the help of a pianist, starts to sing the first hallelujah of the chorus. As she continues, she is joined by a bass and then other voices from the surrounding tables. Within a few minutes about a hundred voices from "Chorus Niagara" all very casually dressed and all in perfect harmony, sing the entire Hallelujah Chorus. It brought me to tears. The power of that video, seen last Christmas by over nine million people, staged not in a church or a concert hall is staggering. It appeared in that secular, consumerist world as spontaneous, as a complete surprise. In that wild event suddenly the value of what Christmas is about was changed from our world of money and shopping to a world of Christmas about a Messiah who is a King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus of Nazareth himself.

Often, in our reading of the story of Jesus in the four Gospels, we miss the reality of the radical nature of what this man did and said. The story of the cleansing of the temples, recorded in all four Gospels, an occasion where Jesus, upset with the rules of worship and how it divided people, upsets the tables of the money changers, is a highly symbolic act, representative of much of what he did and taught. In many ways, Jesus upsets a lot of sacred tables of the culture of that time. He challenges a lot of values fondly held by many of those in power. People who really have the edge on life, he said, who have the potential for being the happiest are "the poor in the spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, and those who long for justice" (Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5). The culture, of course, had another list for what made people

happy: “Those who are self-confident, those who had the power, the money, the health, youth, and good looks.” (Certainly, not much has changed in over 2,000 years.) Jesus challenged his culture and he challenges ours, and overturning the tables and changing the price tags.

Perhaps it started with John the Baptist, that wild, crazy creature of the first century who came just months before Jesus. In Luke, Chapter 3, we have a list of the power brokers of Jesus’ time. It runs from Tiberius Caesar, the Emperor of Rome, to Herod, the local king and then lists the two high priests of the day. Altogether, it is a list of the original “G7 of the first century. These were the powerful, the guys who got things done. But, to the readers’ surprise, God bypasses all of them and picks John, the Baptist, to initiate a new deal for humanity.

The original G7 was incapable of such a job. For them, life was about power and how to hold it, money, armies and conquest. God turns the tables on all of those values and picks John, who calls people to repentance and faith. If you were to read the first three chapters of Luke’s Gospel and count the players whom God chooses to bring about the coming of Jesus, there are also seven of them. They are the parents of John, the Baptist, Zachariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and

Anna, older people who spent a lot of time hanging out in the temple. Finally, the seventh was John, the Baptist. What a different group of seven! There is no power, money, designer labels but they are people of faith. Four of them are old enough to be collecting their pensions. God chooses these “nobodies” to change the world.

Stop and Think

- 1. Who are recognized as powerful in your world?*
- 2. Can you see evidence of God working through “nobodies” to change the world?*

Looking back at the radical nature of Jesus’ teaching, there are two areas where that is most evident. First, the value he placed on human life, who was important and who needed love

and respect. It was a new kind of justice relative to the value of people. We need to remember that in the culture of the first century, there was a very strict code as to who was important and who was not. On a graph of one to ten, women and children barely counted. If you couldn't be ritually clean, the orthodox religious person of the day had little use for you. If you couldn't afford the right offering and temple sacrifice, you were judged as less valuable. If you were a Samaritan or a Greek, you were written off and considered beyond redemption. As a result, when Jesus enters this particular world and spends time with sinners, women and children, plus makes a Samaritan a hero in one of his parables and praises another for saying thank you for his healing, he's "changing the price tags".

In Luke's Gospel he describes nine healings performed by Jesus. Of them, four are men, three are women and two are children. That would have been a scandal in that time but he did it anyway. Many of Jesus' parables are stories of "price tag changing". For example, the parables of the lost sheep, the prodigal son and of the good Samaritan. In all of them, Jesus places high value on people who get lost, who are compromised, or victims, or who don't measure up to cultural norms.

The women's movement of the twentieth century has a lot to be proud of by restoring to women the right to a fuller life in terms of health, employment, education and human rights. One could say that movement has powerful roots in the teaching of this man from Nazareth. Here was a man who practised gender equality, who spoke to women who no other man would and who broke down barriers.

Although the church today certainly has a long way to go, we have in this Gospel record someone who champions the right price tags on people. In so doing, he brings judgement on any culture, church or religion that sees anyone as second class, less worthy of value or privilege. Although, we claim Canada to be a just society in the twenty-first century, we continue to be challenged by issues that threaten women, the

unborn and the severely disabled. All of this speaks to the value of human life and in the secular consumerist society, where all things are disposable, where pain is failure, where God is not involved any more. We need to hear this again whether it is politically correct or not. We also need to hear the voice of this man from Nazareth telling us that all of us are created in the image of God. Whether we're thriving or dying, young or old, we are valuable and worthy of respect. We need to keep that high-end price tag on all people.

Some of you may remember a year or so ago a series on the CBC National News on the work of four health care professionals at Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto. Although all four had very different lifestyles, one a single mother, another a gay man, another an orthodox Jew, another a young married father, they were all united in their deep belief in the value of every human life, an ethic that is a legacy of this man from Nazareth. As Christians, we call him Lord and Saviour. A Messiah, who truly changes the price tags on who's important.

The second area where Jesus was constantly changing the price tags was religion. Although very devout in the practise of his own faith, he saw the flaws and the dark side of religion. Flaws that blocked the spirit of God from doing his desired work. This is particularly true when we read the gospel accounts where we find Jesus running up against the regulations around Sabbath observance. It was a day reserved for worship, of course, according to the Ten Commandments. There was to be no work. However, when Jesus finds himself in a synagogue where people are suffering and asking for his help, he responds quickly with compassion.

The classic account is found in Luke, Chapter 13, where Jesus is preaching and sees a woman bent over in pain. The record tells us that she had been that way for eighteen years and Jesus asks her to come to the front of this worship space. We can see her in our mind's eye making her way alone to the front with her walker and Jesus healing her. She straightens up and

praises God. But then, according to the story, we see the synagogue leader/clerk of session/church warden running to the pulpit and announcing that according to Exodus 20, “There will be no healing on the Sabbath Day. Bring your suffering on tomorrow but not today.” Jesus doesn’t see it that way. In another text he says, “People were not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath was made for people.” You could translate that, “People were not made to serve religion, religion was made to serve people.”

Stop and Think

1. Does the religion we practice serve people or does it mould people to serve it?

For the first century, this was a very radical interpretation. The point of this is not to judge but to recognize what it says about our religious practice today. In the gospel stories, Jesus was particularly critical of the religious practices of the Pharisees. He was critical because he saw it as a religion of barriers, restrictions and rules that kept more needy people out than in. How often have you and I experienced religion like that, been choked by it, even spiritually suffocated? This is a religion that is more serious about its own purity and getting it right than it cares about suffering humanity.

The voice of the religious leader that day, when Jesus healed the bent-over woman, says it all. His concern was protecting the tradition rather than entry into the healing grace of God. He was putting this high price tag on institutional religion, keeping the right people in and others out. Jesus is arguing for a religion not about rules but about relationships, not about being a club but about being a community.

One of the great struggles for the Church in its first few decades was about how open and inclusive it was to be to Gentiles, non-Jews, and how many ritualistic hoops they needed to jump through to become Christians. In the New Testament book of Acts, Peter, using rather important language says, “God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving them the Holy Spirit as he gave it to

us. He made no distinction between us. Therefore, we cannot lay religious obligations on their necks that worked neither for our fathers nor for us.”

What’s important is this all-important shift away from exclusive, race, language and culture-based religion to a more inclusive, barrier-free faith.

When I was serving the Church in Toronto just before Christmas last year, we had a Service of Hope and Remembrance for people who had been bereaved in the previous year. People who had lost someone close and for whom Christmas was going to be difficult. There were over fifty people there and many of them were new to the Church. We lit candles to remember those who were missed and offered prayer. I preached and offered Holy Communion to those who wanted God’s food for the journey. It was one of those religious events where the price tags were all marked correctly.

Stop and Think

- 1. Have you experienced religious events “where the price tags were all marked correctly”?*
- 2. What were they like?*

People came as a result of their pain united in their suffering and need for God; hungry for hope. It was left to God to know their hearts, to accept them, to make no distinction about tradition or denomination. The grace of God was not restricted and those people were deeply blessed.

As we do our shopping for a Messiah, our searching after these rumours of God, we need to know that if Jesus, born in Bethlehem is to be our choice, he is the one who changes the price tags on what our secular Christmas and our religious practice might deem important. Every human life is sacred, loved, needed and necessary. Religion needs to be more wings than weight or as the prophet, Isaiah said, something “that renews your strength, raises you up on wings of eagles, enables you to run and not grow weary, to walk and not be faint.”

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. Did you see the You-Tube video of the performance of the Hallelujah chorus in the mall? Have you ever experienced a similar incident where the gospel breaks out of the walls of church and into the world?
2. Take a look at who is described as blessed in Matthew 5: 3-10. How does that match with our culture's ideas about who is blessed? How does it match with your ideas about who is blessed?
3. Bishop Hockin argues that the story of the coming of Jesus shows God working through "nobodies" to change the world. Do you think that God might still be working that way today? Do you see any evidence of it? Are you one of the "nobodies" he wants to use?
4. The chapter claims that in the culture of the first century had a strict code of who was important and who was not. Who is on the latter list in our culture; whom do we marginalize and exclude?
5. If, as Bishop Hockin suggests, Jesus' ministry was largely to those who were weak and discriminated against, shouldn't our ministry and the ministry of our churches have the same focus? How might that change what we do now?
6. Jesus challenged not only the values of the world but also corrupt forms of religion "that blocked the spirit of God from doing his desired work." Do we, individually or as congregations, ever act in ways that block the Holy Spirit from working?
7. What can we do to move away from "exclusive, race, language and culture-based religion to a more inclusive barrier-free faith"? Think about this both in terms of our individual and corporate lives of faith.

Questions for Bible Study Luke 13: 10-17

1. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. What does this say about how the authorities regarded him?
2. Who initiates the healing? Why?
3. What is the synagogue leader's response? Why?
4. If you had been in the congregation that day, how would you have reacted to these events?
5. How open are our church services to unexpected intrusions? Is our inclination to value our rituals and routines over people in need?
6. Do people feel free to show their needs in our services? Do you? Why or why not?
7. How can we maintain the correct balance between regard for decorum and form and concern for people?

Notes

Chapter Nine

God's Great Comeback

Pre-reading reflection:

What does Easter mean to you?

What does it mean to you when you hear that Jesus rose from the dead?

Have you ever noticed the time and energy that the Church puts into the celebration of Lent? All those programs, the days of fasting and the courses offered. In contrast to that, when Easter comes, it lasts a day. We put all our celebration into one day. It is a great day. We do our best. The churches are jammed but it's only one day.

Bishop N.T. Wright, in his book, "Surprised by Hope", writes, "Easter Week, that is the week after Easter, ought not to be the time when all the clergy and choirs sigh with relief and go on holiday. Instead, it ought to be a five-day festival with champagne, hallelujahs and spectacular singing. Is it any wonder that people find it hard to believe in the resurrection of Jesus if we Christians don't throw our hats in the air?"

Stop and Think

1. *What was your most memorable Easter experience?*
2. *What made it so?*

In this chapter, I want to talk about the resurrection event itself, the evidence for it, why people question and doubt that evidence and how people might come to believe it and benefit from its powerful message.

First, a story. A pastor in England in the mid-1950's by the name of W.E. Sangster began to notice some uneasiness in his throat and a dragging in his leg. After many attempts at diagnosis, it was finally realized that he was suffering from a disease that caused progressive muscular atrophy. His muscles would gradually waste away and his voice would fail. Today, we know that to be ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. With that news, he threw himself into his ministry, writing articles and books as well as organizing cell groups throughout England as long as he could. To the people who pitied him he would say, "I'm only in the kindergarten of suffering. Pity me not." But, the disease progressed. On Easter morning just a few weeks before he died, he wrote to his daughter, "It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice to shout, 'Christ is risen', but it would still be more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout."

What is it, I wonder, that inspires such conviction and such faith? What happened on that first Easter morning that moved this man in the midst of his suffering two thousand years later to utter such gracious words? Was that Easter event more than just the smell of spring in the air or winter giving way to April showers and May flowers, the natural world of regeneration? Was it just that, something we all might believe in, or was it something more? Did, in fact, a dead man actually come back to life, even more alive than he had been before? Frankly, that is the claim that the Gospels make, that the apostle, Paul, makes, and that the Christian church has made ever since.

It is not easy for us, who are products of modernism, to believe in the resurrection of anybody. In a culture dominated by science and reason, where all things can be explained,

there is less and less room for the supernatural, less room for believing in happenings for which there is no rational explanation. Many people in this culture have found it easier to hear the Easter story through this modernist lens and might agree that something happened, but it is better understood in spiritual terms: “Yes, Jesus died and the memory of him was so powerful that it seemed as if he were back again”.

Maybe those of us who have lost a loved one can relate to that explanation. Suddenly, we are left alone and we feel this presence around us of the person who has died and we sense that someone else is in the room and this brings us comfort. In fact, however, that experience although lasting for awhile, soon fades. We need to ask the question, “Is there anything more to Easter than that?” Is that enough to inspire a W. E. Sangster to write, “It would be a more terrible thing to have a voice and not to shout, ‘He is risen’.”

I’d like to take you back to who Jesus was, what he said about himself, what he did during those three years of ministry and why his death was such a tragedy. All four of the Gospels make it clear that Jesus was very comfortable with the label “Son of God, Messiah of God”. Halfway through his ministry, Jesus asked his disciples what people were saying about him. Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” To that Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Peter, because you didn’t get this from any human source, only God.” Jesus also made it clear that he came to announce that the Kingdom of God is near, that God’s will for humanity is being made clear through his teaching and his healing ministry.

Stop and Think

1. If Jesus asked you, “Who do you say that I am?” What would your response be? Why?

The experience of his followers, and their response to Him, makes it clear that Jesus of Nazareth was not just another prophet or preacher to them because in Him they saw a new way to be human. They saw proof that a life that exudes love,

compassion, forgiveness, faithfulness and self-control could actually work. When they saw the sight of the blind restored, former cripples walking again, alienated, broken people, addicts and prostitutes changed and happy again, they saw the things promised in the Hebrew scriptures actually happening in their own personal experience.

But despite these good deeds and good examples, there was a lot of opposition to Jesus. Jesus seemed to go out of his way to say that the religious practices of the day often kept people away from God and His love as much as it drew people to him. He saw the rules of religion as a straightjacket that kept people locked into a system and alienated from others,

increasing peoples' guilt rather than freeing them from it. All of this made Him a threat to the religious leadership of the day but, on the other hand, it exhilarated the poor, the marginalized, and the "walking wounded".

Stop and Think

1. How to you think Jesus would be received today?

When Jesus was betrayed, arrested, brutalized, rejected and nailed to the cross to die a very public death, a lot of hope died with him. For people like Peter, Andrew, John, Mary Magdalene, the disciples of Jesus, their dream of a better world shatters. What was God doing? They did not understand. It's important for us to understand that all of these people were in deep loss and grief. Their friend and leader had died and death for them was a very final thing. Brutality, lies and suppression of the good had won again. Reeling from this tragedy and feeling foolish for thinking that anything but tyranny and power could ever win again, they were preparing themselves for a return to a hopeless and cynical life.

So, when some people discovered Jesus' tomb empty two days later, none of his followers immediately hailed this as proof that Jesus had risen from the dead. None of them said, "I always knew that would happen." No, they thought grave robbers or body snatchers had taken Jesus' body. I can only

conclude from having read all the evidence, that the disciples on the first Easter morning were completely blindsided by Jesus rising from the dead. The empty tomb by itself only complicated their grief until it was coupled with a series of actual appearances of Jesus that day to Mary Magdalene, Peter, John and two disciples somewhere on a lonely road to Emmaus.

In all these instances, Jesus doesn't just appear like a phantom in a mist and then disappear. He involves himself in conversation, first with Mary Magdalene and then with the two disciples. In both cases, at first, they don't recognize who He is. These appearances were not dramatic epiphanies as Hollywood might show them, complete with dazzling lights and Jesus saying "Ta da, I'm back!" Instead they are very ordinary, first in a garden and second walking along that dusty road. Frederick Buechner once wrote, "Unlike Christmas, Easter is not a major production at all. It's not even really much of a story when you come right down to it. And, that is, of course, the power of it. It doesn't have the ring of great drama. It has the ring of great truth."

Again, Bishop N. T. Wright suggests that neither the empty tomb by itself nor the appearances by themselves prove very much, but when you put them together, they provide a complete and coherent explanation for the rise of the early Christian belief that Jesus was indeed alive and that things for the world had radically changed. Another piece of evidence as to the integrity of the reporting of the resurrection, was that the first witnesses to it were all women. This fact is reported in all four Gospels. Bishop Wright writes, "Whether we like it or not, women were not regarded as credible witnesses in the ancient world but there they are, front and centre, in all four gospels as the first witnesses, the first apostles, nobody would have made that up."

There is no doubt that all of this, the empty tomb and Jesus appearing several times to his disciples, took time to get

into the conscious reasoning processes in the minds of the apostles. When it did, they grasped the phenomenal truth that this same Jesus who had healed the sick, made the blind see, the leper walk, who had taught them to love their enemies and be merciful to others, had not been defeated after all. This system of darkness and despair that they saw at work that afternoon as the nails were being pounded had itself been defeated. It no longer ruled the day. Something much bigger had arrived. As a result, that hope for better lives and a better world was also alive again. Maybe, just maybe, God does love us the way we are. He does forgive us the way Jesus said he did. Maybe loving your neighbour as yourself instead of looking out for number one all the time does work. Prayers are answered and miracles happen. Maybe there is Someone to believe in after all.

Stop and Think

1. Do the Easter accounts of resurrection transform your thinking in these ways?

The Easter message is not just a one-day but a three-day story and it contains life lessons for all of us. It starts on a Friday, a Friday of darkness, failure, suffering and grief. All of us have our Fridays. They are those times in our lives when nothing goes right, when the gloom of grief weighs heavily on our shoulders and we come to believe that nothing will ever change. The evidence is all around us. We see it in the newspaper, and in television news broadcasts. As well, there has developed this “Friday” mentality. It is a way of thinking that takes for granted that death is the great reality, that it wins every time. It says it in the advertisements in subways and buses in London and Toronto that “there is probably no God,” that we are alone with whatever hand life has dealt us. All of us to some degree have our Fridays, sooner or later.

Then there is Saturday, where life naturally moves us. It is that “shadow time”, a kind of unknowing. Although some of the pain of Friday passes, the finality of our loss or condition sets in. In our minds we are forced into a compromise to

accept a reality that none of us want. The books we read and the movies we go to do not end happily. In order to survive, we keep busy and try to mask our feelings, and we remain on the run. For a lot of people that is how life ends up. There are no surprises. What you see is what you get. Like the followers of Jesus, the dream of something better has died. The nails and the crown of thorns are all the drama that life can deliver. So, as two of the disciples do, they take a walk to Emmaus. As Frederick Buechner observes, “Emmaus is the place to go when you find out that the world holds nothing sacred anymore.”

What the Easter story tells us is that life is not about two days but a third day, as well. Perhaps this is why you’re perhaps reading this chapter. Just as our weekend is more than a Friday and a Saturday, what the resurrection of Jesus declares is that there is a bright Sunday morning. This is the third day that no one expected, where life wins over death, where spring wins over winter, where a truth about human possibility is no longer just a wild idea or wishful thinking but actually lived out in the risen life of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the day when the powers of darkness, failure, suffering and grief are the losers and we realize that there is a power the size of the universe, bigger than the gun and bigger than the almighty dollar. It is a power that transcends the market forces of any world and offers a hope that no one can take from you. It is a power that lifts you up rather than pulling you down. Easter is all about third-day living.

I close this chapter with a story. In one of the great art galleries there was a large painting of Faust playing chess for his soul with the devil. Faust was originally from a German legend popularized by Christopher Marlowe and by Charles Gounod in his opera. It is the story of a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for wealth and pleasure. But, Faust wants out of the agreement and offers to play a game of chess to win his soul back. Looking at the painting, it appears that

the devil has checkmated Faust for his soul. In the painting the face of the devil is full of joy and Faust's face is in great despair with his head in hands having lost. The story goes that hundreds of people would come to that gallery and stare at the painting nodding to each other, "Yes, that's the way it is, life gets you in the end. The bad guy always wins."

The story goes that one day one of the great chess masters of Europe comes to the gallery and stands for some time examining the chessboard itself. Suddenly, he lets out a cry, "It's a lie, it's a lie," he said, "look, the game is not over. I can see it. The king and the knight still have moves that they can make!"

It seems to me that those of us who might call ourselves "third-day people" are people who, in the resurrection of Jesus, have seen for ourselves that we, too, have moves that we can make. That the game of life doesn't stop on Saturday night. Sunday is coming. Because of that we have a hope and a future that we never dreamed possible all because of this master from Galilee. As St. Paul put it in 2 Corinthians, Chapter 4, "We are pushed hard from all sides but because of Him we are not crushed. We are bewildered but we never lose hope. Other people cause us pain but God never deserts us. We are knocked down but because of Him never knocked out."

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. How important is Easter in your year? How does it compare with Christmas and other holidays? Why do you think that is so?
2. Bishop Hockin claims that resurrection from the dead is difficult to believe in a culture dominated by science and reason. Do you find it hard to believe that Jesus rose from the dead?
3. How might you explain the resurrection to someone who was sceptical about it?
4. What was the initial response of Jesus' followers to reports his body was missing?
5. What evidence supports the claim that Jesus rose bodily from the dead? Does it convince you?
6. Bishop Hockin writes about life attitudes shaped by Friday, Saturday or Sunday thinking. What are those and which one most shapes your thinking?
7. How can we make the hope of the resurrection a more present reality in our own lives, our congregations and the communities in which we live?

Questions for Bible Study Luke 22:54-60; Acts 2:14-24

1. These two accounts of Peter describing events about two months apart were written by the same person, compare and contrast them (for example, they both happened in Jerusalem).
2. A very different Peter is described in the two stories – what are the key differences?
3. What would account for these differences?
4. The section from Acts ends with Peter accusing the crowd of complicity in the killing of Jesus and claiming that Jesus rose from the dead. Could his newfound courage be based on a deception he and the other disciples had developed for their own purposes?
5. When the subject of connection to Jesus comes up, are you more like the Peter described in the first story or the second? Why?
6. What can we do to have the boldness of Peter as described in Acts?

Notes

Chapter Ten

Walking on the Wild Side

Pre-reading reflection:

Has Easter made any difference in your life? How?

Why do you think people tend to pay more attention to Christmas than Easter?

Over the past few years our children and grandchildren always remember Easter with cards and chocolate and a cigar! The cigar, usually one of fine quality, comes from my son in Ontario. That tradition began many years ago and my memory fades as to its origins. Whenever I ask my son the reason for the cigar, he responds with, “Dad, there is something about Easter that demands you to do some wild thing that you don’t do any other time. So, go for a walk and make some smoke. It’s on me.”

In this second Easter chapter I am asking the question, “Easter, what difference does it make?” What difference does it make to the way we live, how we look at the world, how we see ourselves? What difference does it make that a man back in the first century, who died a terrible and very public death, actually came alive again two days later? What difference does that make to me in the 21st century? Other than an excuse to share candy eggs with our children and grandchildren, to wear some new clothes or to buy some daffodils in support of a good cause, what difference does it really make that the dead Jesus of Nazareth came back to life as a real human being?

I remember hearing an Easter Sunday sermon once, when the preacher suggested that Easter was a grand metaphor for hope. Whether it really happened or not wasn't the issue, but it was a grand symbol or metaphor for spring, when Mother Earth is able to shake off the shackles of winter and come alive again. The preacher's advice, therefore, was to go out into your garden and enjoy your day. Having heard that and maybe smoking two cigars that afternoon, I was brought back to some sanity when I read the work of Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian writer and preacher now retired in Vermont. His article on Easter was called "No Metaphor". "The resurrection of Jesus was no metaphor. It was the power of God. When the Bible speaks of Jesus alive, it means Jesus alive at

large in the world, not as some shimmering ideal of human goodness or achieving the power of positive thinking but as the very power of life itself." He continues, "If the life that was in Jesus died on the cross; if the love that was in him came to end when his heart stopped beating; if the truth that he spoke was no more than just a few good ideas added on to the other good ideas, if that's all it is about Jesus, then all of us are in despair."

Stop and Think

- 1. How do you respond to the claim that the events of Easter should really be taken as metaphor rather than reality?*
- 2. Why do you suppose that is a popular view?*

John Updike, in his "Seven Stanzas on Easter" says, "Let us not mock God with metaphor, making of the event a parable for our own convenience." (Don't you love that!) What we do with Easter is not celebrating a metaphor, it is rather something very real and very new in the human experience, a power and an energy discovered by those who can get past their narrow and restricted world view and get a glimpse of this new way of seeing the world in five dimensions. This is a world where the impossible becomes the possible and endings become openings for new beginnings all orchestrated by

a God who is very much alive, a God who's business it is to make all things new. Easter is about this unleashing of the unexpected, the unimaginable, this higher dimension of life that could only happen because a dead man, God's one and only son, came alive again.

C.S. Lewis, the great Christian apologist of the twentieth century observed, "I saw a crocus yesterday and although there was only one of them, it was a promise to me of what comes next. Winter may still seem to have its way but a corner has been turned and the world will now be different. But," he goes on, "human beings are not crocuses. It is not natural for us to come alive by ourselves. Instead we all have this choice on Easter morning, to stay and die in the winter of our fragile lives or to go on into the spring and summer of God's new world."

Stop and Think

1. The focus of media news report is often bleak and cynical. Do you see signs, like C.S. Lewis' crocus, of hope for the world?

My favourite Easter story is found in Luke's gospel, chapter twenty-four. It's about a walk that two friends of Jesus took on Easter afternoon to a little town called Emmaus just a few kilometres west of Jerusalem. It's one of those journey stories, where the participants start their day with no expectations other than more of the same but finish their day different people altogether. It's really a story about what Easter, rightly believed, can do for a person. Maybe it's a walk on the wild side. Frederick Buechner has a different take on Emmaus. He argues, "Emmaus is that place where we all try to go to forget that the world around us holds nothing sacred." For these two friends of the crucified Jesus, hope had died the previous Friday. Everything they held sacred was wrapped up in this man from Nazareth. Their value of life, value of a caring God, value of community, the whole idea was that this truth that was good and beautiful and all had died on the cross of Golgotha. In spite of some wild rumours of an

empty tomb, these two people head off to Emmaus to try to forget that the world around them holds nothing sacred.

We, too, live in a culture where God and the things of God have been sidelined in favour of relativism, materialism and rationalism. If you can give a scientific explanation for the existence of something, it exists. Otherwise, it's your own imagination. Any rationale for a moral position that rests on faith or religion alone is now dismissed as something good for you but please don't impose it on me. It's everyone for themselves, survival of the fittest, business and the bottom line first. Not much is considered sacred anymore. The writer, Luke, invites us to go on this walk, a road less travelled, a walk on the wild side.

To briefly summarize the story, it is Sunday, Easter afternoon. These two friends of Jesus leave Jerusalem for Emmaus. They are in serious conversation but are then joined by a stranger, who asks them why they look so depressed. They are surprised that he hasn't heard about what happened the previous Friday and the great failure of Jesus' life. They fill him on every detail of Friday. They said, "We had been hoping. . . but it's all over now." The stranger listens at first but then enters the conversation. In the language of the 17th century, "Foolish ones and slow of heart to believe ought not Christ to have suffered these things and then entered into his glory." It's as if Jesus takes the script of their story and says, "Hey guys, you've been reading this upside down, the cross and the suffering were all necessary before the good times could begin."

Stop and Think

- 1. Have you ever had the experience of someone teaching the scriptures in a way that really connected with you?*
- 2. What was the reason for that deep connection?*

What followed was a walking Bible study. This would be off the charts for these men. It went on for perhaps a couple of hours. Noticing that it was getting late in the afternoon and

that Emmaus was near, they observed that the stranger seemed to be intent on continuing on. So, they invited him to join them for supper in the town, which he did. Over supper, as the stranger said grace and broke the bread to share, the friends came out of their daze and recognized who he was. It was Jesus, alive and himself. With their jaws open he disappeared but, like that crocus for C.S. Lewis, they didn't mind the disappearing act for they knew in that moment of recognition that life would never be the same again. The corner had been turned all because Jesus was alive.

There are four parts to this story of walking on the wild side to Emmaus that point us to new, exciting and different ways of experiencing life all because of the resurrection of Jesus. The first step, simply put, is that whether we know it or not we are not alone. The disciples who were alone at first were joined by this stranger and although they didn't recognize him as such, he was God nonetheless. The problem with our three-dimensional secular world is it no longer makes room for mystery, surprise or for the supernatural. To speak of any of that in academic chambers across Canada is to invite ridicule and laughter. To speak of a reality in the fourth dimension, the spiritual dimension, in our human experience is, to say the least, a little dangerous. Yet, this is the first difference in a life that can entertain the possibility of meeting a stranger on a walk to Emmaus, a stranger that turns out to be God.

A few weeks ago, I had coffee with a friend who claimed such an experience. He said, "For years I had serious questions about faith and how to reconcile my need to believe. I had doubts and questions. The fact of God and his existence was still an issue for me." He goes on, "It was February and I was riding the ski lift alone thinking about my family and the deep affection I had for them when suddenly the sun broke through the grey February sky. What came with it was a light that enveloped me in a way that is difficult to explain other than to say it felt like I was in another dimension. I felt sur-

rounded by a peace and heard, perhaps subconsciously, a voice, 'Yes, there is and now you know'. There was no doubt for me what the words meant. I was not alone anymore. God was real. The experience quickly ended and the sun slipped behind the clouds and I heard an urgent voice saying, 'Lift the bar and get off now.' I skied off with my eyes too full of tears to see where I was going.

You may not have had such a dramatic experience as that but I believe many of us have encountered something not unlike the stranger on the Emmaus road or the ski lift experience. This is someone or something that we may not have associated with God or even the Holy Spirit, but nevertheless the message came through that we are not alone but only if we choose to be alone will we be. It's important to note from Luke's story that the two friends were very open to this third man joining them as we should be. Those experiences are never something that we should dismiss as purely our imagination.

A couple years ago, John Geiger, wrote a book called "The Third Man Factor", which documents the strange but not uncommon experience of people in crisis who fear for their lives. Included are 9/11 survivors, mountaineers, prisoners of war, all escaping traumatic events and describing a close presence, a helper or guardian, "A third man that leads you out of the impossible." I doubt if Geiger had read the story of Emmaus before he wrote the book but certainly described something very much like it. The difference is Christians know who the third man is.

The second part of the story that is significant comes from the conversation between this third man and the two disciples. It's about letting the God, who is alive and as close as you permit, take the script of our lives and the way we've been living it and turn it right side up. He will do it in such a way that we will see life with a new and fresh perspective. The word for that process is conversion.

Over the years of my ministry I have quoted many modern writers, preachers and thinkers and they include Madeleine L'Engle, C.S. Lewis, Frederick Buechner, Henri Nouwen and Anne Rice. In every case there came a moment for them where there was a change in their personal lives brought on by a personal encounter with initially a stranger but then someone who turns out to be the living God. In every one of these life stories there was a change, not only in their religious outlook but in the way they lived, the way they looked at the world and the way they saw themselves. Like the two friends on their way to Emmaus the script that they had for their future had been suddenly reinterpreted for them.

Anne Rice, to whom I just referred, has written about twenty books with an occult and or a paranormal theme. Her titles include, "Interview with a Vampire" and "The Tale of the Body Thief." But then in 2002, she surprised her fans with a new book, "Christ, the Lord, Out of Egypt," a novel about the early boyhood of Jesus. In explaining what happened to her she writes, "After a long struggle for many years, during which I moved from being a committed Atheist to a new believer in Jesus Christ and feeling an overwhelming love for Him. It was finally on a Sunday morning in church in 1998 that I received a glimpse into what I can only call 'the infinite mercy of God'. At the time I had no idea that my life would be so transformed; that the anxiety I took for granted as part of my life for years would almost entirely disappear." The point is what Easter faith can do; not the product of a dead prophet but of a living person unleashed into the human experience by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

The third step on this Emmaus journey happens in a home somewhere in the village itself over supper. Still not able to recognize who the stranger is, the two friends invite him to say grace and they break bread with him. In a flash of knowing, the stranger becomes a friend, Jesus himself. Maybe it was seeing the scars on his hands or the smile or his tone of voice.

In that brief moment all of it came together. The truth finally dawned that Easter had happened and that He was truly alive. According to the text, “It didn’t last long and he vanished from their sight.” There’s no indication that the two friends in any way resented the brevity of the moment. Any more time with Him might have been too much to bear. It’s important to note from the text also that what got Jesus to the Emmaus table was an invitation, “Stay with us.”

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book “Mixed Blessings”, suggests why Jesus does not stay long. “A challenge for every believer is the choice between our words to Jesus, ‘Stay with us’ and his words to us, ‘Follow me.’ We can plead with him to stay put at our little table with its candles and flowers and when he does not, we can get stuck in our memories of him and even make more up, anything to fuel our loss, our nostalgia. Or, we can go with Him, hear Him say over His shoulder as He dives into the crowd, broken humanity following, follow Me as I feed the hungry, visit the sick and be a friend.”

Finally, the closing words of the story. The two disciples left the table and Emmaus and returned to Jerusalem telling the disciples, “We have seen the Lord. He is risen.” Leaving the dessert on the table, they were suddenly empowered to face that dark road again and to go back to that very place from where, hours before, they had left. This is what an Easter faith can do for us. We realize that we are not alone anymore. There is this presence, this stranger that can carry us through our unknowing because we hear about another way to script our lives. Rooted not in grief or loss but in hope and possibility because we catch just a little glimpse of his presence, whether that be in church, at the Eucharistic table, reading something, in a conversation with a friend or taking that Sunday afternoon walk “on the wild side.” Through any of this, He is mystically present and all it adds up to a new energy, a new power that enables us to go back to face the very thing that may have crippled our lives. We can face it and deal

with it not alone but with a new kind of Friend and friends that share that same experience of life.

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. What are your Easter traditions? Do you know the origins of them or reasons for them?
2. Is Easter season an important part of your year? Why or why not?
3. What difference does Easter make in your life beyond the rituals and traditions of the season?
4. Bishop Hockin writes that the Road to Emmaus account is one of his favourite Easter stories. What is your favourite Easter story? Why?
5. The first of four lessons from the Emmaus story is that we are not alone. Does that resonate for you? Do you have a sense of God's presence in your life? If so, how does that come to you?
6. The second lesson is to permit God "to take the scripts of our lives and the way we've been living and turn it right side up." Is this a pleasant or frightening prospect for you? Why?
7. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that, "A challenge for every believer is the choice between our words to Jesus, 'Stay with us' and his words to us, 'Follow me.'" Have you felt this tension in your life? What were the circumstances that prompted it?
8. What might we do to more fully engage with the potential of Easter faith to change our lives?

Questions for Bible Study Luke 24: 13-35

1. What are the circumstances of this meeting with Jesus?
2. Why do you think these men did not recognize him?
3. In view of their description of events, what seemed to be their view of the meaning of Jesus' life and death?
4. How does Jesus respond?
5. What prompts the men to recognize Jesus?
6. Why do you think they finally 'see' who he is?
7. Once they realize what has happened how do the men respond?
8. Have you ever encountered the risen Christ?
9. What has been your response to knowing him?

Notes

Chapter Eleven

All Dressed Up and Somewhere Great to Go

Pre-reading reflection:

What do you believe happens to a person when they die? Does the prospect of aging and death fill you with dread and despair or do you have a personal hope for a future beyond death? What is the source of your feelings?

What do Easter and Resurrection have to say about our future, including the process of aging and then the prospect and certainty of dying? What do Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus say about that?

Woody Allen, the comedian and filmmaker, once said, “It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” The fact is that he will be there, as will all of us, when we die. One of the things that happens to us as we get older is we become more aware of changes in our bodies. That certainly has been my experience. I’m in my seventies now, take a lot of pills and sometimes forget things: a friend’s name, or the location of my glasses or keys. I sleep less at night and take a nap in the afternoon. Sometimes it’s a struggle to walk as I used to with knees and hips not being what they used to be. On those days when my brain is working fairly well I realize what all of this means. The warranty for a healthy, carefree life is limited. I don’t think It’s about

to run out, but it doesn't cover the things it used to. There is little prospect of a renewal or an extension. It says that all of this change is taking me to a place where, frankly, most don't want to go.

I titled this chapter "All Dressed Up and Somewhere to Go" to suggest two things, first, that there is somewhere to go and it's a good place, and second, getting properly dressed for the journey is part of the process.

A couple of years ago, there was a great article by the journalist, Ian Brown, in the *Globe and Mail*. He described a conversation he had with Jean Vanier, a writer and Christian thinker and the founder of the L'Arche Community. The theme of the article was about getting old, facing death and wondering what lies ahead. Brown wrote, "To me, looking at it from fifty-five, getting older looks like a discouraging journey into loneliness, dying being the ultimate loneliness, the ultimate solitude." He asks Vanier, a man then about eighty, a series of good questions: How do you think of yourself at your age? How do you accept the inevitable advancing weakness and loss of what it means to be a man and is there anything ahead? I'll return to that question in a moment.

Once, as I was walking out of a church after a funeral, two

Stop and Think

- 1. We say nice things about heaven at funerals but do you have confidence in them?*
- 2. Isn't it possible they are just convenient stories to comfort the bereaved?*

women just ahead of me were having a discussion. As we walked down the steps to the sidewalk, one of them said to her companion, "What a lovely service." "Yes," said the other woman with a tone of resignation, "if only I could believe that stuff about heaven." Although references to heaven play an important part in the words of the funeral service, it remains for many people a bit of a dream or even a fantasy.

What happened on Easter morning that might provoke this cynicism? And how can the death and resurrection of

Jesus of Nazareth in the first century convert us to a hope in life from a fear of death?

In this chapter I would like to do three things: First, to talk about something that the New Testament says about this somewhere “great to go.” Second, how the knowledge and the hope of that destination affects the way we die and what we think of dying. And third, I’d like to say something about dressing properly for the occasion – something more serious than what we might imagine.

First, where we go after we die: Jesus in the gospel record makes it clear in verses from John’s gospel when he says “I go to prepare a place for you and I will take you there.” There exists for his followers a post-mortem place, where we are in some sense alive and very much in his presence. As you will remember from the Good Friday story, Jesus says to one of the man dying beside him, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” St. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians writes, “For to me to live is Christ, to die is better. I am torn between the two. I desire most to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.” Certainly for Paul and that first century church, the great hope for them, a hope generated entirely by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, had dramatically changed the way they saw their future.

For Jews and Greeks of the first century, life after death was a very shadowy uncertainty. The ancient worldview of Homer, Plato and Cicero had no room for resurrection. This Christian idea of “being with Christ” and overcoming the great enemy, death, was a brand new thought. St. Paul’s great treatise on the subject in 1 Corinthians, chapter 15 links the rising of Jesus from the dead to the new life of his followers after they die. It seems that in the Corinthian church there were people who seriously had doubts about their own resurrection. To them, Paul writes, “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is our faith. If

only for this life we have hope in Christ, then we are to be pitied more than all other people.”

I have long been intrigued by Bishop N.T. Wright’s observations in “Surprised by Hope” and what he says on the subject. Bishop Wright implies that, taking a broad view of the Biblical witness, the teaching is that the resurrection of our bodies happens in two stages. The first stage is immediate, what we call heaven or paradise. He argues, “It is a state in which the dead are held firmly within the conscious love of God and the conscious presence of Jesus Christ, while we await the final day of resurrection.” As well as this, Paul also speaks about that final day when the dead in Christ will rise and take on new bodies, as Christ did after his resurrection.

In describing that first stage, the author of the Revelation of St. John puts some descriptive colour to the sense of heaven. He says to the angel, “Who are these all dressed up in white robes? These are they who have come out of the great tribulation, washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. They stand before the throne of God and serve him day and night. Never again will they be hungry, never again will they thirst, for the lamb of God will be their shepherd and he will wipe away every tear from their eye.”

The Christian faith developed over the years, there have been many explanations and different speculations on this deep and mysterious subject. Hugh of St. Victor, writing in the twelfth century about the resurrected body said, “It will be immune from death and sorrow. It will be at the height of its powers, devoid of disease and deformity and around thirty years old, the age at which Christ was raised. It will surpass anything we can imagine even from the accounts of Christ’s appearance on Earth, after his own resurrection.”

Jean Vanier, in Ian Brown’s article, describes his hope of life after death. “So what do I believe happens after we slip into this other world. Yes, it will be a wonderful moment of peace, of joy, and ecstasy of love. We have arrived at last. It

will be more wonderful than anything we could have imagined. But then, there will be a moment of pain. We shall see clearly how and when we hurt and wounded life and the lives of others. But then, very quickly, yes very quickly, there will be a new feeling of being loved in spite of all our brokenness, dirt and mess. This is where we are fully accepted, fully forgiven, fully loved.”

All this brings us then to the second question. How does believing in this reality of life after death, this “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” affect the way we die? Could there be something better than Ian Brown’s “discouraging journey into loneliness”? I well remember a couple that I married in Ontario in mid-life. We still have the pictures in our album. He was a doctor at Women’s College Hospital and she was a nurse. He died of cancer in his sixties and I conducted the funeral. A few years later, his wife became ill with cancer, as well. I had moved to New Brunswick by that time but, on a visit to Toronto, dropped in to see her. “I’m dying,” she said, “but, the one thing that amazes me most is that God is so close. His presence is so intimate. Sometimes, I can almost feel his arms holding me. I am not afraid.” It has been my pastoral experience that for those who can see through the eyes of faith, there is a level of assurance and a hope of a future with the Christ they have known in this life plus there is a diminishing of fear and anxiety.

Stop and Think

- 1. Is there such a thing as “dying well”?*
- 2. If so, how is it different from ordinary death?*

Cardinal Basil Hume, leader of Britain’s Roman Catholics for many years, died in 1998. On hearing that he had cancer, he wrote, “I have received two wonderful graces, first I have been given time to prepare for a new future, and second, I find myself uncharacteristically calm and at peace.” I remember talking to a funeral director some years ago. We were driving out of the cemetery after a committal. I asked

him, “Paul, do you notice any difference in the families you serve between those who have faith and those who don’t? Oh yes,” he said without hesitation, “people with a faith can leave the cemetery knowing that there’s more, more for their parent, or their loved one, than just death. They still grieve but grieve with hope.” Then he told me of a prayer that another minister would use at the grave that impressed him. It went something like this, “Now, let us leave this place believing that the person we have loved is not here but is now safe, safer than she ever has been in the arms of the heavenly Father.” I’ve been using that prayer ever since.

St. Paul has these wonderful words in 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, “Because of our faith in the risen Jesus Christ, although we are pushed hard from every side, we are not beaten down. We may be bewildered but we never lose hope. Others may make us suffer but God does not abandon us. We are not knocked down but never knocked out.” What we believe makes a difference in our dying. Faith in the God who raises the dead allows us “active engagement” with the future, not as something to be feared but as a source of hope for our present days.

Finally, a word about how we need to dress for that wonderful day. When I was working on this chapter, I was surprised at how many references there are in the New Testament about dressing well. Of course, it has little to do with whether we buy our clothes at Value Village or Holt Renfrew, little to do with what label we can on our shirts or skirts. Rather, it is about the attitude and faith we wear. You may remember the parable Jesus tells about the man who comes to a wedding “not wearing the wedding garments” and was told to leave the reception hall and get properly dressed. That has little to do with fashion or the right to dress as we please but everything to do with whether we live life our way or God’s way. Remember that song by Paul Anka, “I Did It My Way”? I cringe whenever I hear it sung at a funeral, because it runs so

counter to the meaning of Jesus' parable and the wedding guests.

The bottom line is that we can't come into God's presence on our own terms. We come on God's terms or we don't come. It's his house, his new world and his gift. In a figurative way, we need to be well-dressed for the occasion. St. Paul writes in Colossians, chapter 3, "Put on tender mercy and kindness, as if they were clothes. As well, dress up with gentleness and patience. Clothe yourselves with forgiveness and above all, dress up in love. Love will hold it all together."

In contrast, he suggests in the same chapter, that we get rid of the old clothing we used to wear, "anger, rage, hate and lies." Instead he says, "Put on Christ." In Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible, *The Message*, he continues, "You're done with all that old life. It's like a filthy, smelly set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire. Now, you're dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator with his label on it. Those old-fashioneds are now obsolete. So, for this new life, dress up in the wardrobe God picked out for you – compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline and regardless of what else you wear, be sure to wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never leave home without it."

Stop and Think

1. Are you doing anything to "dress" for the future, to "Put on Christ"?

Jean Vanier echoes Paul's words in his response to Ian Brown's questions, "Let us wait then for this new world to dawn. Let us prepare for it each day through loving others, walking in faith and becoming men and women of peace."

I close with this. If somewhere on that sacred journey of leaving this life and moving into the next, there is a moment, albeit a brief moment of accountability as I get checked out on the wardrobe I've worn in my life, I expect three questions. The first question God may ask is: "I've given you life, what

have you done with it? Have you used it, abused it or shared it with others?" Then he may ask, "I have given you your brother, your sister, your neighbour and other people. What have you done with them?" And finally, I think he will say, "I have given you my Son. What have you done with him? Ignored him? Denied him? Or accepted him as friend and redeemer?"

I know that I flunk out on the first two questions. Although I've tried to value God's creation and value every relationship in my life, I've failed sometimes miserably. But hopefully, I can answer that I do love the Lord Jesus on the third question and am grateful for his love, grace and forgiveness and have tried to dress up in the garments of compassion, kindness and love.

I believe that because of his promises, not my own good works, and by his grace powered by his death on the cross and in his resurrection from the dead, I will experience what Jean Vanier describes: "that moment of joy and ecstasy, that brief moment of pain and then very quickly accepted, forgiven and fully loved." Call it paradise or heaven but it's where God is, where Jesus is, waiting for that day when we come home "all dressed up". And it's somewhere great to go.

Questions and activities for reflection and discussion

1. Ian Brown and Jean Vanier offer two very different takes on aging and death; what are they and which one resonates more with your own views?
2. N.T. Wright describes two stages of life after death for the Christian, immediate transport to Jesus' presence in the spiritual realm and eventual physical resurrection. Have you ever heard this before? How do you respond?
3. Jean Vanier imagines several experiences in the immediate aftermath of death including "a moment of pain" which seems quite important in our ultimate sense of God, his forgiveness, and ourselves. Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?
4. Bishop Hockin asks, "How does believing in this reality of life after death . . . affect the way we die?" What is your response to this question?
5. The chapter concludes by suggesting we'll face three questions as we enter God's presence. What are they and what will your responses be to them?

Questions for Bible Study Philippians 1: 12-26

1. Paul begins by writing that he is “in Chains for Christ”, how does his attitude seem for someone in prison for their faith?
2. What would explain his general sense of optimism?
3. Paul muses about two possibilities for the future, what are they and how does he feel about each?
4. What do you think he means by the phrase, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Do you think you could echo that for yourself?
5. Why does Paul think it is not quite time for him to die?
6. How about you, does God have work for you to do? What might that be?

