



FAITH IN CRISIS

THIRTY SHORT REFLECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

I wrote most of these pieces some time ago, for the front cover of the church bulletin at St Albans, Highgate. The idea of putting them together as a book came to me after a friend asked if she could reprint some of them, to encourage the members of her own congregation. I thought perhaps they might also be helpful to a wider audience.

Since they were written to reflect on what was happening in my church family and in the world at the time, some contain references to things that are no longer topical. But I decided to include them because they still seem relevant to the sort of issues that Christians face today.

The order in which they appear is quite random. I haven't attempted to sort them, either by topic or by the date they were written. You can read them in whatever order you like.

Some, I hope, will be helpful to those who are struggling to apply their faith to the current crises. Others address those whose

faith itself is in crisis because of doubts and fears. I pray that the Lord will use them to encourage you.

Stella Budrikis

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1. IS GOD REALLY GOOD?

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?
And not one of them will fall to the
ground apart from your Father.
(Matthew 10:29)*

Sometimes I wonder if God really is good. When I watch the news, or read a newspaper, I wonder how we can keep saying "God is in control". When I see the terrible pain and suffering that people inflict on each other, not just in the world, but even in the church, I sometimes begin to doubt that God is even real. Where is he? What is he doing? Are we just wasting our time in church on Sunday?

What keeps me from tossing my Bible in the bin is reflecting on the life of Jesus. Jesus lived in a time when the blind and the lame and the leprous had no hospitals, no Medicare, no social services. He saw children tormented by uncontrolled epilepsy and dying of infections.

He lived in a country occupied by soldiers who didn't look to see if the media were watching before they beat people up. As he

wandered about the countryside, he probably saw the mangled bodies of those who had been crucified. He heard his disciples arguing, vying with each other for status, making promises he knew they couldn't keep. He knew far better than I do what the real world is like.

And yet he kept talking as if God were in control. He spoke of God as our Father, who loves us and cares for us.

Perhaps Jesus was just crazy and deluded, ignoring what was in front of him and living in a spiritual dream world. If that's the case, we might as well go home. But if he was sane, then it's tremendously reassuring to know that he lived in the real world. He knew what it's like, and yet he could still trust his Father. He could still believe that his life and death had purpose and meaning. He could still work with his disciples, despite their failings. He didn't look around him and throw up his hands in despair.

Jesus could have used his divine powers to miraculously change the world. He was certainly tempted by that possibility. So why did he heal only a few? Why did he feed just a few thousand and not all the world's

hungry? Why didn't he end the brutal political system of the time?

Who knows? The fact that he could have done these miracles, but didn't, suggests that what he did was more important than all these potential miracles. It helps to bring things back into their eternal perspective.

2. **HELP ME, LORD**

Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my pleas for mercy!

In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness!

(Psalm 143:1)

Where do you go when life hurts? Who do you turn to when your health falters, when relationships sour, when things happen which leave you feeling sad, angry, weary or frightened? As Christians we know the answer: "Take it to the Lord in prayer."

Unfortunately, despite the old song, many of us have learned that it's selfish to pray for ourselves. Ignoring the ache in our hearts, we methodically work through praise, thanksgiving and praying for others before we bring our own problems to God. It's as though, somehow, we must earn the right to talk to him about ourselves.

Imagine a child coming to her father and saying "Dad, you're the greatest. I'm really thankful for all the things you've given me. Please look after my sister Mary, who has a

sore thumb. And Dad, I've broken my arm and it hurts."

I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't regularly praise and thank God. Nor should we be selfish and demanding children who ignore the needs of others. Sometimes praying for others can lift us out of a mood of self-pity.

But it's easy to fall into the subtle temptation to use praise, thanksgiving and intercession for others as a means of twisting God's arm. We may seem to be honouring God. Yet what we're really doing is showing a lack of trust in him and probably feeding our own pride as well. ("See how unselfish I am, praying for Mary before I pray for myself".)

The psalmists often poured out their hearts to God, before reminding themselves of his goodness to them in the past. Praise frequently followed their laments, but not always. Their prayers sometimes seem quite abrupt and self-focused. Yet it would be difficult to accuse the psalmists of not trusting God or of not taking him seriously.

Jesus taught his disciples to begin their prayers with worship (Father, hallowed be your name) and a commitment to God's kingdom (Your will be done) before asking him to meet their own needs (give us this

day). This is how we should pray most of the time.

Yet it's not the way that Jesus prayed in Gethsemane or on the cross. Nor did he ever turn anyone away because they failed to worship and thank him before they asked for healing. The very fact that they came to him for healing showed that they recognised who he was and put their trust in him. We can do the same.

3. CHOSEN IN CHRIST

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. (John 15:16)

Jesus taught his disciples many things in the three years that he was with them. But when he spoke to them for the final time before his death, we can be sure that he didn't waste words. What he told them over supper in that upstairs room was of utmost importance. And one of the things that he really wanted them to know was that they did not choose him, but he chose them.

Why was that? Three possible reasons come to mind. First, he wanted to ensure that the disciples would never become arrogant about their position. They would never come to believe that God owed them something for having dedicated their lives to him. They were disciples by his choice, not theirs.

Second, he wanted to avoid becoming a commodity or package, something the disciples would sell to others as 'a good choice

in life'. The person who is called by Christ does not make 'a decision for Christ' in order to get the spiritual goods. They are already chosen and can only humbly submit to him as Lord. The disciples were called to bear witness to Christ, not to sell Christianity.

Thirdly, he wanted to give the disciples reassurance in those times when they were tempted to believe that they were not committed enough, not dedicated enough, and therefore not acceptable to God. Peter was about to deny Jesus. Thomas would doubt him. All would abandon him. But that didn't negate the bond between the disciples and Jesus, because he had chosen them. If it was by their own choice that they followed him, their failure could suggest that they had not been sincere enough in their decision. But if he had chosen them, they were secure.

That is not to say that following Christ doesn't involve a striving to become a better disciple. But knowing that we are Christ's by his choice, not ours, sets us free from constantly questioning our level of commitment based on our performance. We will avoid the trap of frequently dissecting our past motivation while grimly trying to improve

on the commitment we made last week, last month, last year.

When we fall down, it is our reliance on Christ, not our resolution to follow him, that we need to review. "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." is commitment. (Matthew 26:35) "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." is reliance on Christ. (Acts 4:29) We are his, he has chosen us, and he is committed to seeing us bear lasting fruit.

4. DON'T BE ALARMED

And he said, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. (Luke 21:8)

People have been predicting the imminent end of the world and Jesus' second coming since his ascension. Some of these predictions have been based on supposed prophetic visions or dreams. Others have focused on auspicious dates such as the years 500, 1000 and 2000 AD. Calculations based on the book of Revelation have produced a wide range of predicted dates, most of which have already passed by uneventfully.

Cataclysmic events such as the sacking of Rome (410 AD), the bubonic plague in 1347-53, and the wars of 1914 and 1939, have also prompted people to predict the imminent end of the world. Anxiety being created today by various crises internationally is likely to lead to a rise in end-of-the-world forecasts.

The Bible restrains us from making such predictions or becoming anxious about them. For one thing, it provides a record of wars,

famines, plagues and disasters spanning over 2000 years. Whatever dreadful thing is happening in our world today, we can be sure to find something similar in the history described in its pages. "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). In all these events, God remained sovereign.

Secondly, we have Jesus' words in Matthew 24:6-8; "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains." In other words, we will see what midwives call "practice contractions".

Jesus assures us that when the end does come, and he returns, it will be both sudden and obvious. In the meantime, may our response to what is happening in the world be to offer compassion and prayer for those affected, trust and steadfastness in our own situation.

5. HOLDING ON TO FAITH

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

Most of us have probably wondered at some stage whether we can really go on being a Christian until the end of our lives. Our faith seems so weak and wobbly at times.

Perhaps we've struggled with doubts about certain doctrines or felt puzzled and disturbed by something we've read in the Bible. Maybe we've tried to share the gospel with others and found ourselves flummoxed by their questions or their negative response.

Or perhaps we're disheartened by our own lack of discipline in Bible reading, prayer and service. We determine to do better, but soon we get distracted by other things. Some distractions we have no control over, like illness in the family, but sometimes we're way-laid by trivia. We begin to fear that we're back-sliding so fast that soon we'll be unable to hold on to our faith.

Christians in many parts of the world face much harsher threats to their faith. Their fear

is that they may denounce Christ under torture or hide their faith in order not to lose their livelihood. In comparison, our fears seem pathetic. But they are real, nevertheless. We've all met people who once were Christians, who now disclaim their faith. We don't want to become like them.

The fact that we do fear losing our faith is reassuring. It's a sign that the Spirit is still at work within us, otherwise why would we care? But how will we remain faithful?

It's humbling, yet also heartening, to realise that in the end we remain in Christ because he who called us and gave us faith to believe in him in the first place, continues to call us and give us faith. He gives us the faith to read, to understand, to pray, to act. He holds onto us when our thoughts are scattered or dreadful, when our reading and praying seem hollow, when we're weary of doing good. (Galatians 6:9)

And he provides faithful people around us, to pray for us and encourage us to keep going. The greatest prayer we can pray for another Christian is "Lord, preserve their faith".

6. AFTER THE STORM

After forty days Noah opened the window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven. It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. (Genesis 8:6)

When we're in the middle of a crisis, all we want is for it to come to an end. Each day we look for signs that it might soon be over. We long for life to return to normal.

Once the crisis *is* over, many things do return to normal. We may live in the same place, work at the same job, be surrounded by the same people as before. But even if nothing else has changed, we ourselves are likely to have changed as a result of what we have been through.

We may also find that our relationship with God is different to what it once was. Though we were aware of his presence with us during the crisis, and still draw comfort and strength from him, our established rituals, habits and patterns of thought have been disrupted by our experience. What once seemed important may no longer seem to

matter. What once seemed simple and clear cut may now seem more complex.

Some people find this confusing, even alarming. They fear that they may be losing their faith. Yet in fact their faith and trust in God is deeper than it was before they went through a crisis. If you find yourself in this situation, give yourself time to readjust, and allow God to speak to you in and through your new circumstances. Rather than struggling to go back to where you once were, be obedient where you are now, and allow God to lead you to where he wants you to be.

7. TIMOROUS OR MR FEARING?

*He gives power to the faint, and to him
who has no might he increases strength.*

*Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;*

*but they who wait for the Lord shall
renew their strength;*

*they shall mount up with wings like
eagles;*

they shall run and not be weary;

*they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah
40:29-31)*

Timorous and Mr Fearing are two of the characters described by John Bunyan in his allegorical story, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Despite the similarity of their names, they have rather different personalities, and come to very different ends.

The Pilgrim, whose name is Christian, meets Timorous and his companion Mistrust at the top of the Hill of Difficulty. Unlike Christian who is heading for the Celestial City, Timorous and Mistrust are going the other way. Christian asks "Why?" After all, they

have already come some way in their journey and struggled up the Hill. Why not keep going?

Timorous replies, "The further we go, the more danger we meet with." He's seen the dangers ahead, he's had enough, and he's going back to the easy life he had in the world. He was never really committed to reaching the Celestial City.

Mr Fearing also falters at every danger and opposition he meets. But unlike Timorous, he stands his ground, quaking, until he finds the courage to go forward. His journey to the Celestial City is slow and painful, for his companions who have to bear with him as well as himself. Yet the Lord seems to take special care of him. And in the end, he arrives at his goal.

Two things distinguish Mr Fearing from Timorous. The first is his determination to reach the Celestial City. No matter what lies ahead, he won't turn back, even if he fears going forward. The second is that his greatest fear is not possible danger or discomfort but making mistakes. He often misses out on the joys of being a pilgrim because of his lack of assurance. Yet he sometimes shows remarkable courage and spiritual strength.

Bunyan was an astute and experienced pastor. He recognised that Mr Fearing's problem was not that he lacked the will to be a Christian, but that he carried with him a personal weakness. Bunyan also observed that the Lord seemed particularly gentle with such people.

None of us ought to be like Timorous, giving up too soon. No doubt we would all like to be like Great Heart, Faithful, or Valiant-for-Truth—Christians who do great things for the Lord and seem to fear nothing. Yet if we feel like Mr Fearing at times, we can be assured that God still has a place for us in the Celestial City and will see that we get there.

8. ASKING WHY

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. (Proverbs 16:9)

How are we to understand the things that happen to us which disrupt our carefully planned lives? Both minor interruptions to our day and major disasters can unsettle us and cause us to ask, "Why this, and why now?"

Or at least, if we are brought up to believe that we are 'masters of our own destiny' they will unsettle us.

On the other hand, if we are complete fatalists, or if we believe that God is arbitrary and unpredictable in what he does, we may be much less concerned with asking "Why?" It's our fate, or the will of the gods, and we will conclude we just have to accept it.

Christians tend to adopt one of three responses to unexpected setbacks to their plans. The first response is to see the disruption as the work of Satan, and to be even more determined to press on. After all, if Satan is trying to oppose what we are doing, it must be good!

The second response is to assume that God is testing us in some way, to see if we will continue to obey him. Again, pressing on is usually the only appropriate response.

The third response is to wonder whether it's our own fault. Maybe we're heading in the wrong direction. Perhaps our plans are misguided, and we need to change our minds. If so, then more prayer and preparation are needed before we move on.

I suspect that which response we adopt is partly a matter of personality. Those who are self-confident are more likely to consider the first two options, while the person who is prone to self-doubt or cautiousness will tend to think of the third possibility first.

But there are also differences in theology (that is, our understanding of God) in the three responses. The first sees Satan as God's implacable enemy, the source of all evil. This view avoids attributing evil to God, whose goodness cannot look upon evil, far less will it.

The weakness in this view is that it attributes far too much power to Satan and even risks falling into a dualism where the 'good guy' is at war with the 'bad guy' and eventually overcomes him. It also ignores

those places in scripture where Satan requests permission from God for his actions or even seems to do God's bidding.

So, for instance, when the gospels say that Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tested by Satan, they say clearly that the Holy Spirit was doing the leading (Luke 4:1-2). When Paul says that in order to keep him humble, he received a "messenger of Satan in his flesh", it seems unlikely that Satan himself was interested in Paul's humility. The implication is that God wanted Paul to remain humble and allowed (or even called upon) Satan to inflict him (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

If we take the view that God is sovereign over every event, then all that happens to us must ultimately be from God, and by his will. This is the theology of those who adopt the second response. If we're not to fall into the trap of thinking that bad things only happen to bad people, we must conclude that God allows bad things to happen to good people.

But in order to avoid the conclusion that God is the source of evil, we then need to assume that he must have some good purpose for making the bad things happen. So difficulties are 'sent to try us', to test our

commitment and submission to him, or to build our character.

Those who respond by asking "Did I just get it wrong" also believe in God's sovereignty. But their theology allows more room for human beings to make choices that may not be God's will. God's sovereignty and control are demonstrated in the way in which he uses both our good and bad choices to work out his good purposes.

So how do we decide the cause of the setbacks to our plans and the necessary action to take? It isn't easy. All three responses, all three theological understandings, have some support from scripture. If we become conscious of having sinned in the choices we've made, we should deal with that by confessing our sin and seeking forgiveness. But what if we've been doing what we believe is good and pleasing to God, and still run into difficulties?

The book of Job deals most directly with the "why" behind unexpected setbacks. As readers, we are told that Job's afflictions and the disasters that happened to him were the result of a strange conversation in heaven between God and Satan. But no-one told Job about that.

Instead he was left to wrestle with his theology. It's interesting that although Satan was the immediate cause of his afflictions, he never considered that option. Nor did he accept his wife's advice to give up and curse God. Unlike his friends, who piously reinterpreted his circumstances to fit their inflexible theology, Job turned directly to God and asked "Why?"

He also asked "Who?" Who is this God that I serve? In the end, he had fewer answers than when he started, but he also had a much deeper knowledge of God.

9. NO GOODBYES

I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28.20b)

A few days before she was to start kindergarten, a little girl began insisting that her mother should let her walk there alone on the very first day. This seemed rather strange, so her mother tried to find out why it was so important to the child. Eventually the little girl said "Well, if I go on my own, I won't have to say goodbye to you when you leave".

We all dislike saying goodbye and being separated from those we love. Yet it's an inevitable part of life. Friends move away to work in another city, children leave home, sometimes war or persecution drives people apart. The ultimate separation is death, which removes even the possibility of being reunited or keeping in touch. There are no emails or Christmas letters from beyond the grave.

Some find any separation so painful that they become demanding and cling to those who love them. Others build walls around themselves and pretend that they don't care. But we're made to be in relationship with

other people. We can't avoid the pain of separation if we want to be human.

Only someone who will never die can promise that he will never leave us or forsake us. Only one who has eternal life could keep such a promise. That one is Jesus. He won't tire of us and go off to find someone who is better at getting their Christian life together. He won't abandon us because he has more important things to see to. Death cannot separate us from him. When separation from those we love seems overwhelming, he is there with us, a constant presence in our lives.

10. RESCUED

*And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.
(Colossians 2:13-15)*

When I was a child, I went to church with my parents and attended Sunday school every week. By the time I turned fourteen, there were no other kids my age in the church. The Sunday school supervisor decided that, since he was short of teachers, I could take on a class. I found myself teaching a class of ten and eleven-year-olds.

It was daunting, but I enjoyed finding ways to bring the old familiar Bible stories to life. Then Easter came along, and I became aware that I really had no idea how Jesus dying on a cross had anything to do with me or the children I was teaching. 'Jesus died to

save sinners'. It said so in the prayer book. I'd heard it every week in church. But what did it mean?

I was in my early twenties before I found the answer. While reading a Christian book, I discovered that Jesus willingly took on himself the sins of the whole world. On the cross, he paid the penalty for our rebellion and indifference to God. My sins were included. And because my sin had already been judged and the penalty paid by God himself, in Jesus, I could be at peace with him. I didn't have to earn my way to heaven (a task which I had already learned was impossible). That discovery became a precious moment. Not only did I have an answer, I also had a Saviour, a Rescuer.

Since then I have learned that the Bible gives many different answers to my question, 'What does "Jesus died for sinners" mean?' Jesus was the ransom, paid to set us free from our slavery to sin. Jesus took our sins to the grave and left them there when he was raised to life. Jesus, being sinless, overcame the power which death held over sinners. Satan threw everything he had at Jesus, and lost, so that he no longer has any claim over us.

Jesus became the new representative of humankind, replacing the old representative, Adam. Jesus was the sacrificial lamb, the true sacrifice which the Old Testament sacrifices had only mirrored. Jesus, by his supreme example of love for people and obedience to God, draws us to himself. Jesus conveys to us the lengths to which God would go to save us from the consequence of our rebellion towards him.

The Bible writers used these and other examples, drawn from human experience, to explain how Jesus' death could save sinners. They are all helpful and true. And yet in the end, salvation is still something which is beyond our full comprehension. It is too marvellous for words. All that we can do is accept it from God with wonder and gratitude.

11. TAKING OUR STAND

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)

One of the key themes of Paul's letter to the Ephesians—in fact one of the key themes of Paul's theology—is that through the church the wisdom of God is made known to "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 3:8-10). Christ has been raised from the dead and is seated "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion" (1:21).

Now we, who once followed "the prince of the power of the air" along with the rest of the world (2:1-2), have been made alive with Christ and united in him and through him. We have "the full armour of God" to help us stand against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"(6:12).

Who or what these "rulers and authorities" are is not spelled out by Paul, but clearly they

are more than just earthly and human kings and governors. They are in the heavenly places, that is, in the spiritual realm, and they are somehow associated with the "prince of the power of the air." Jesus speaks of Satan as "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31) who he sees (prophetically) falling from heaven (Luke 10:18). Elsewhere in the New Testament Satan is referred to as the "prince of demons" who has a kingdom in this world.

The church is thus reclaimed ground in the great cosmic battle between God and the spiritual powers. Those powers seek to dishonour God by separating us from him and from each other. Their ultimate weapon is death, which separates us permanently. But by defeating death through raising Christ to new life, and uniting what was once disunited through the church, God has declared his wisdom and authority over every other power.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus the battle has already been won. But for now, those powers are still active in the world, spreading disunity, hatred and strife through human sinfulness. We need no reminder of that. So how do we, as ordinary human beings, made extra-ordinary in Christ, take our stand against the "present darkness"?

Paul's answer is surprising. We do it by striving to keep the unity of the church, and by being submitted to one another. By treating our spouses with courtesy, kindness and respect. By being reliable and hardworking employees, or if we are an employer, by treating our employees with dignity and fairness. By being patient with our children and demonstrating in our own lives the things we are trying to teach them (5:21-6:9). And doing all these things prayerfully, always relying on the Holy Spirit.

These are not minor matters. They are the places where spiritual warfare is lost or won in our lives.

12. THE LORD WILL BE MY LIGHT

*Do not gloat over me, my enemy!
Though I have fallen, I will rise.*

*Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be
my light. (Micah 7:8)*

Dungeons are traditionally dark, windowless places. That's no accident. Except for those born blind, human beings find being in the dark for any length of time disturbing. We rely so much on our vision to make sense of the world. Keeping a prisoner in complete darkness is a sure way of torturing their mind and breaking their spirit.

Sometimes life itself seems to become a dark and dreary dungeon. We can't understand what is going on. Our personal lives are shadowed by illness, loss and loneliness. The world around us is dark with disasters, wars, cruelty, threats and human suffering.

This is as true for Christians as it is for anyone else. In fact, it can seem worse for Christians. Where is God in the darkness around us? Why is he allowing us to suffer such confusion and disorientation? In those

times we are likely to hear a voice whispering to us, "God doesn't care! He can't help you. Are you sure he even exists?"

To recognise these whispers as the voice of an enemy, *the* enemy, rather than our own, is a great relief. To summon the courage to say, "I don't know why this is happening, but I know that God is trustworthy, and I will wait for him", is often the turning point in our troubles. It's like finding a candle suddenly shining in the darkness. The dungeon doesn't disappear, but we're no longer afraid of the dark.

13. THE ILLUSIONS OF THE DISILLUSIONED

Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! (Psalm 43:3)

Something I learned rather late in life is that healing and wholeness never take place until we accept the truth, no matter how painful or sad the truth may be. I've seen it in my own life, as I've struggled with accepting my own failings and limitations and the limitations of people who are important to me. And I've seen it proved true many times in the lives of those I've counselled. Whether the healing required is emotional, physical or spiritual, the first bitter medicine that must be applied is always the truth.

Most of us prefer to live with our illusions. We want to believe that our emotions are always appropriate, our motives are always pure, our bodies are strong and are going to last forever, no matter how we treat them.

We want to believe that athletes never use drugs, that politician from 'our' side of politics

never lie, that religious leaders never feel or gratify lust, that businesses never sell us faulty or dangerous products.

When our illusions about ourselves are shattered, we feel sadness, shame and anxiety. It may take us a while to accept the truth, deal with reality, and start to change. When our illusions about others are destroyed, we feel betrayed and angry. We are 'dis-illusioned.'

At the moment we live in a very dis-illusioned society. Every day seems to bring more news of fallen heroes, guilty gods and goddesses. The question is whether we will accept the truth and recognise that our illusions were doing us more harm than good. Will we accept that we had put people on pedestals that couldn't support them. Or will we simply lash out at whoever comes within reach, until our anger subsides, and we find some new illusions, some new idols.

It's not that we shouldn't have high expectations of those who are in positions of influence or power. Those who betray the trust society places in them should be called to account. But that needs to be done in a calm, legally sanctioned manner, by the appropriate people. As a society we need to

be careful that we are punishing the crimes or misdemeanours of which the offenders are guilty, not raging against their failure to be the perfect people we wanted them to be.

We all need to ask what it was about ourselves that made us put such faith in mere human beings. Why did we cling to our illusions for so long? And how are we feeding the illusions of others who put *us* on pedestals and ask us to be their role models, their heroes, their idols? We all need a regular dose of truth, but will we take it?

14. FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE UNITE US

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6)

In a world where conflict abounds at every level, the ability of Christians to live and work together in unity should be a wonderful testimony to the truth and power of the gospel. Yet Christians are often as bitterly divided as anyone else. The world, the flesh and the devil poison our fellowship.

The world offers us endless distractions from spending time with each other. It encourages gossip while mocking those who try to live out the truth. The world teaches us to be impatient with the weak and those we disagree with, envious of others' successes, and self-promoting.

The flesh, our human nature, instead of rejoicing in the richness of our diverse

personalities and backgrounds, finds difference threatening and prompts us to demand our own way. It holds on to hurts and grievances instead of seeking healing.

And Satan, whose aim is to divide the church and leave it powerless, uses even what is good to disunite us. When conflicts arise, he rejoices, and when we ignore them, he is just as happy, since dishonesty is as paralyzing as disunity.

But God has provided us with antidotes to these poisons. First, our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, which brings us reconciliation with God. Nothing compares in importance to this. In faith we consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. (Philippians 3:8)

Second, hope, which lets us forgo having our own way in everything, because we know that we have an eternal future. Though we teach and encourage one another, hope also prevents us from trying to take responsibility for changing one another, since we know that it is the Holy Spirit's work to make each of us more Christ-like.

And finally love, the sort of love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes,

always perseveres. (see 1 Corinthians 13.)
Love like that can only come from God
himself. It produces harmony among us and
brings him glory.

15. **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TRUST GOD?**

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." (Isaiah 30:15a)

Trust is important in any relationship. But there are two levels of trust. The first involves our expectation that the other person will do us good rather than harm and will carry out what they say they will do. Over time we learn whether or not to believe the things they promise.

The second, deeper, level of trust involves our sense of safety when we are with them, and our willingness to reveal ourselves to them. We all long to be known deeply by someone. Yet life teaches us to be wary of exposing our real selves to anyone, in case they use that knowledge to harm us. It takes a great deal of trust to reveal our most intimate self to another.

Our relationship with God involves both types of trust. As we step out tentatively in faith, we learn through experience that God

will do what he has promised. He has our best interest in mind. Sometimes we go through painful experiences which seem to make no sense. Only in retrospect do we see how God was working for good. Such experiences help our tentative faith to grow into a deeper trust in God's goodness.

But trusting God also means trusting that he is safe to be with. It means being sure that if we approach him, he won't overwhelm us. If we reveal our true selves to him, he won't turn on us in anger, or disapproval, or scorn.

Almost the first thing we learn about God is that he knows our every thought, word and deed (Psalm 139). That could be frightening to know. Yet our assurance as Christians rests on the fact that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). God knows all there is to know about us, and yet he loves and accepts us.

But how well do we know this? I suspect that most of us cope with the idea of God knowing us intimately either by reducing God to something less than he really is, or by attempting to hide certain parts of ourselves from his gaze. The more we learn of the awesomeness of God, the less inclined we feel to be known by him. That is, until we really

come to believe, with our hearts as well as our minds, that he is to be trusted. Being fully known by God then becomes a source of joy and strength rather than a fearful thing.

16. ASKING GOD TO EXPLAIN HIMSELF

"Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25)

The Old Testament is vital to our understanding of who Jesus is and what he said and did. Yet it's not always easy to read. Sometimes the problem is our distance in time and difference in culture from when it was written. A good commentary can help us to understand the context. But the greater difficulty for many of us comes with those passages that make us exclaim, "That's awful! Why would God say or do that? What sort of God is this?" Many atheists point to these passages as a reason for their atheism.

Some would argue that if it's in the Bible, it's God's word, and that's that. Whether we like it or not, we must accept what we read. We should never presume to question God.

Such questioning is the first step on the road to unbelief.

But the Old Testament itself is full of people who were startled and disturbed by God's words and actions and questioned him about his motives. Abraham (Genesis 18:16-33), Moses (Exodus 5:22-23, Numbers 11:11), Joshua (Joshua 7:7), Gideon (Judges 6:13), David (Psalm 10:1), Isaiah (Isaiah 63:17) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 12:1) all at some time cried a horrified "Why, Lord?". The writers of the books of Job, Jonah and Habakkuk each sought to answer the question of how God's righteousness and faithfulness could be reconciled with his actions (or his inactivity).

What distinguished them from most atheists is that they genuinely sought understanding, and sought it from God himself, rather than using their questions as an excuse for unbelief. Underlying their questions was a solid belief not just in God's existence but in his goodness and righteousness, based on their own experience. And although they were direct, even blunt, in speaking with God, they acknowledged that they were presuming on his grace in doing so. In humility they

remained aware that they were created beings asking for answers from their Creator.

17. DECISION MAKING

And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. (Mark 2:14)

Each day we have choices to make about how to use our resources, what to do with our time and talents, and how to relate to the people around us. The decisions we make depend very much on what questions we ask.

The pragmatist, for instance, will ask, "What is the easiest and least costly thing to do?", while the more sentimental will ask, "What will make everyone happy?" Both questions result in some dubious decisions.

The moralist prefers to ask, "What is the right thing to do?" Their judgement as to what is right might be based on the Ten Commandments, humanist principles, or some other standard. But ultimately, they've adopted an ethical system that best agrees with their own opinion of right and wrong. The fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil produces moralists as well as criminals.

The legalist asks a slightly different question: "How far can I go without breaking

the law?" Again, the law might be God's law, or some other standard. It doesn't really matter—what matters to the legalist is staying within the law. Legalists hate situations where things are grey rather than black and white. If no law exists, they will invent one in order to keep within it.

Those who understand that being a Christian is about relationship with God try to avoid pragmatism and sentimentalism, moralism and legalism by asking, "Lord, what is your will in this matter?" But then they must decide whether they'll accept God's will or do things their own way. There are subtle and not so subtle ways of side-stepping God's will, such as not waiting for an answer to the question, accepting a favourable answer without testing it, refusing to accept that the answer which comes is from God, or refusing to make a decision at all.

Those who have truly accepted Jesus as Lord do something much more radical—they make their decision *before* asking any questions. "Lord, I will do whatever you want me to do" is their decision. "What do you want me to do?" is the question that follows. How they arrive at an answer to that question is less important than the fact their decision is

made in the context of their relationship with Christ.

18. WHAT CAUSES DOUBT?

But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment[g] stained by the flesh. (Jude 20-23)

Some people have faith like a rock. Nothing can shift it. But for others, faith is more like a small boat in a storm. It offers them shelter, but they are constantly in danger of being swamped by waves of doubt.

What causes doubt? Poor health and mental illness can both affect the mind's ability to grasp the truth and hold on to it. Those who are ill, or weary because of circumstances beyond their control, need support, prayer and encouragement to hold on to their faith. For others, a good night's sleep may be enough to bring back their sense of joy in believing.

Often doubt grows as a result of neglecting to meet with God or our fellow Christians. We allow ourselves to become too busy, or let unconfessed sin become a barrier to prayer. After a while, we start to rationalise our own failure by criticising God or the church. Soon we are questioning the very existence of God.

Self-doubt may lead to doubts about faith. Hearing someone who is more intelligent, more articulate or better educated mocking their beliefs, the timid person asks, "How could I be right and they be wrong?" When they discover that a non-Christian friend has had wonderful spiritual experiences, they start to wonder if their own experience of faith has any value.

The answer to these sorts of doubts is in the historical person of Jesus. Our faith is based not just on our own experience or our own reasoning, but on Jesus' existence and the claims made about him.

Lack of knowledge of the basic Christian doctrines can give rise to doubt. If a Christian's understanding of the gospel goes no further than saying, "Jesus died for me, now my sins are forgiven", he or she may have difficulty seeing how that is relevant

when they lose their job, their spouse dies or they meet some other trouble. Sometimes doubt can be the spur to finding answers to questions that had never been asked before.

Doubt is often the result of double mindedness. The person who became a Christian to please a parent or lover, or in response to the emotional power of an altar-call, will sooner or later find themselves questioning their decision. Others find their faith is weak because they're reluctant to let go of some other commitment, such as seeking power or success. Here again, doubt may be a healthy stimulus to examine oneself and the gospel and go deeper into faith.

19. GIVING AND RECEIVING

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." (1 Corinthians 12:18-21)

Someone once calculated that a bag of wheat passes through the hands of twenty people before it arrives on our table as bread. If the engineers at the power station strike, we are left literally powerless to cook a meal or wash our clothes. When a business in Japan collapses, the whole world shudders.

Yet we still cling to the idea that personal independence is both possible and laudable. We encourage our children to be independent from the time they are born. Those who would be unable to lead an "independent existence" are aborted, while the aged and the sick fear becoming dependent so much that some beg for "mercy killing". Independence is the chief virtue in today's world.

I am not suggesting that it is good to "sponge" off other people if we are able to do things for ourselves. But those who are dependent through no fault of their own often feel worthless as a result of our society's emphasis on self-reliance.

As an adult, Jesus was perhaps the most autonomous person that ever lived. In any situation, he was the one in control. And yet he chose to come to earth as a helpless baby. Why didn't he make a more dignified entrance as a mature man?

Throughout his ministry Jesus depended upon the kindness of women such as Joanna and Susanna for his needs. Why didn't he use his powers so that he could be independent of such charity?

When condemned to death, the philosopher Socrates chose to die at his own hand. Why did Jesus allow himself to fall into the hands of men, and become so helpless that he couldn't even quench his own thirst?

In his book "The Stature of Waiting", W.H Vanstone suggests that by allowing himself to be "acted upon", Jesus gave dignity to the whole range of human experience. Those who are dependent display the image of God just as much as those who are active and

independent. They may even be more open to the richness of God's world.

Independence is not a Christian virtue. In his epistles, Paul uses the analogy of a body to describe the church. Each part depends on the others, and all depend upon the head, who is Jesus. Learning to receive ministry from others is as much a part of becoming Christ-like as learning to minister to others. In a body, the only independent cells are those which have become cancerous.

20. GOD AS OUR FATHER

Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23)

"How can I be sure that God really loves me?" is a question that haunts many of us, even if we don't express it aloud. The simple and true answer is, "Look to the cross. God loved us so much that he sent his beloved Son to die for us. How could anyone love us more than that? Just believe it."

But the answer sometimes misses the underlying question. What is really being asked is, "How can I be sure that God loves *me*, personally?" Those who ask aren't usually in any doubt that their sins are forgiven. They can believe that God loves his people, as a people. But is that love personal? Or is the victory of Jesus on the cross like an Olympic athlete's gold medal? When Cathy Freeman won gold for Australia, she won it for all of us, in a sense. But few of us will ever relate to Cathy Freeman personally. Did Jesus die "for sins of the whole world" on the cross? Or did

he die for you and me, John and Mary, Raoul and Mee Lin and Ahmed and... all those individuals who turn to him?

The cross, we're told, brings us peace with God. But we can be at peace with someone we've never met and who is quite indifferent to us. If my parking fine is paid (by me or someone else) I'm at peace with the council who issued it, but no closer to anyone. What does it mean to say that through Jesus, I have peace with God?

What really gets to the heart of answering these questions is the promise that those who put their trust in Christ will know God as Father. A hero may die for his country. A king may be at peace with his subjects. A school principle may care about his students' well-being. But a father loves his children individually and intimately.

How will we experience that fatherly love? Sometimes we will experience tender, intimate comfort from God. But a good father also loves his children by providing for them and protecting them. He shows his love by teaching them, encouraging them, listening to them. Sometimes he disciplines them. He expresses his pride and pleasure in them to others. If this is how a good human father

loves his children, then we might expect God to do the same. And he does.

21. THE GREAT LIE

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?’ (Romans 8:31,32)

Behind most sin is the acceptance of a lie. “God does not really care about you’, it says, “He only looks after his own interests. You ’ll have to look after yourself’.

Eve fell for it in the garden. She knew what God had said about the fruit on the tree at the centre of the garden. She trusted God and saw no need to try it for herself.

But then the serpent planted doubts in her mind. “You won ’t die!’ he scoffed. “Don ’t you realise that God wants to keep this power of knowing good from evil to himself. He doesn ’t care about you. He ’s lying to you. You can ’t trust him.’ (see Genesis 3:4,5)

Eve looked again at the fruit. What if the serpent was right? Why was God keeping this fruit to himself? Perhaps he didn ’t have her best interests at heart. So, she reached out and took some.

What did she say to Adam as she handed him a piece? Whatever it was, Adam decided to trust another person's word against God's. He fell for the lie too.

There can surely be no greater lie than this one. It denies the basic character of God, his love and his righteousness. If we decide that God does not love us, that he can't be trusted, then sin can no longer appal us. Why shouldn't we rebel against an unloving God? Only fear will hold us back.

Satan, the father of lies, is happy for us to believe in God, provided that we see him as a selfish tyrant who demands our obedience. The whole history of redemption revolves around God's struggle to persuade his people to reject the lie and accept the truth of his love.

In Jesus we see the true character of God revealed. He is the Truth. As the Son of God, he is committed to our good, willing to lay aside his power and glory to demonstrate his love. As Jesus the man, he shows us what we might be if we really knew God. All fear, all defiance is gone, replaced by trusting obedience. On the cross we see the ultimate proof of God's love. Selfish tyrants do not die on crosses for their people.

“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?’ (Romans 8:31,32). Here is our answer to the serpent’s lie.

22. LOOKING BACK

*I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your wonders of
old. (Psalm 77:11)*

When things become difficult, it's always tempting to look back to the past, to the "good old days".

Sometimes, like Lot's wife, we look back in regret. We compare the good things we've lost—the relationships, the comforts, the circumstances—with what we have now. It's easy then to become bitter, or to live in the past instead of the present. We can become rigid and immobilised, a "pillar of salt".

At other times we become nostalgic for a past that looks far better in hindsight than it did at the time. Out in the desert and feeling hungry, the people of Israel forgot the hardships they had endured as slaves in Egypt. They began to long for the good things they had left behind—trivial things like leeks and onions—and to grumble.

Regret and nostalgia are seldom helpful. They prevent us from dealing with the reality in which we live and keep us from having hope

for the future. But worse than that, they demonstrate a lack of faith in God's goodness.

Yet the Bible does tell us to "remember". We're told to remember the way that God has provided for us in the past. Then, rather than regretting what we have lost, we can be thankful for the blessings we have received. Remembering God's goodness to us in the past will lead us to live in hope that he will continue to provide what we need in the future.

We're also told to remember the way that God has been with us through difficult times. Instead of becoming nostalgic, we can live in the reality of the present, knowing that God is still with us now and will continue to be with us. Remembering will give us the strength to endure.

23. DO NOT BE AFRAID

Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the ruin of the wicked, when it comes, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught. (Proverbs 3:25-26)

"Do not be afraid". The words echo over and over in scripture, from Genesis, through the books of the Law, history and prophecy, into the Gospels and on to Revelation. Sometimes they're used as gentle reassurance, as when the angel appeared to the startled Mary. More often they're a strong command. Do not be afraid! Do not fear!

But why shouldn't we be afraid? Fear is a natural, basic emotion. When a car hurtles towards us at 100 kilometres per hour, fear gets us out of its way. Fear keep us away from the teeth of snarling dogs and venomous snakes.

When God says, "Do not be afraid", it's not this reflex fear he's addressing, but can't-sleep-at-night, what's-to-become-of-me fear. The sort of fear that saps your energy and churns your stomach when you're facing the armies of Canaan, or the Jewish Sanhedrin, or

terrorist threats. The sort of fear that makes you say, "Why me?" when God calls you to lead his people out of Egypt, or be his prophet, or witness to a colleague. The fear that wonders if God really meant it when he said that he'd give you descendants, or bring you back from exile, or raise Jesus from the dead, or give you eternal life.

We're not to fear because God is our shield (Genesis 15:7), our deliverer (Exodus 14:13), our redeemer (Isaiah 41:14). God is with us to help us fight our battles (2 Chronicles 32:7-8). He will never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6). Fear doesn't take God at his word. It makes him out to be a liar and untrustworthy. Fear gives greater honour to those we fear than to God. God alone is to be feared (Isaiah 8:12)

We're not to fear because what we fear is temporary and will pass, but God is eternal. Those we fear face a far worse peril than we do—they will perish if they don't turn to God. (Isaiah 51:7-8). Their power is limited to injuring our mortal bodies, but God has power over our immortal lives and theirs (Matthew 10:28). Jesus holds the key to death and Hades (Revelation 1:17).

We're not to fear because suffering for what is right brings a blessing (1 Peter 3:14). We've been promised a kingdom worth far more than anything we possess in this life (Luke 12:32) And if Jesus suffered insult and persecution, why should we expect anything less? In the face of threats, we're told to go on proclaiming the Good News (Matt 10:24-26). Do not be afraid!

24. **SEPTEMBER 11**

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Matthew 10:28

In the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, journalist Martin Woollacott wrote in the Guardian newspaper: "President Bush has said that the US now faces a 'monumental struggle of good versus evil'. In the anguish of this week's events, everyone reaches for the big words. But there is a tendency to inflate the size of the enemy to fit the size of the crime."

When we look at the world, it's easy to imagine that good and evil, God and Satan are two equal and opposing forces. Some religions are based on that belief. At times it almost seems that evil has the upper hand. But it isn't true.

It is true that evil can be frighteningly destructive. Eighteen hijackers caused the death of thousands and for a while brought much of the world to a standstill. But when those eighteen men died, their power to kill and destroy died with them. The destructive

power of those who stood behind them will also come to an end. The crime was horrendous, but its perpetrators' capacity for evil is limited by their own frailty and God's judgment.

Satan would like us to believe that he has God-like powers. But his power too is limited. God spoke and by his word the universe was created. Moment by moment he sustains the existence of every atom and every living creature. Should God choose to, he could speak, and the universe would cease to exist. Satan has no power to create or sustain anything, only to destroy, and even that power is limited.

In peaceful times, we're tempted to define our lives in terms of what we own and what we do. We start to find our security in our health, our comforts and our own abilities. Evil powers, whether human or spiritual, can then easily keep us in fear by threatening to rob us of this false security.

But real life comes from a relationship with the living God, made possible through Jesus. Those who know this life fear losing their relationship with him more than losing their mortal lives. If God himself has promised that no-one (not even terrorists) can snatch

us from his hand, nothing (not even war and death) can separate us from him, we must be careful not to inflate the size of the enemy.

25. SUFFERING

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers. (Hebrews 2:10-11)

One common argument against Christianity goes like this: "if God is good, loving and all-powerful, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? I can't believe a good God would allow innocent people to suffer".

For some, this is reason enough to reject the whole idea of God. But as C.S. Lewis pointed out, banishing God doesn't offer any better explanation of evil. If there is no God, how will we define good and evil? If we live in a universe governed by chance, then a cyclone in Bangladesh is no more evil than a sunny day in Perth. A child dying of cancer is, objectively speaking, no less natural than a rabbit being taken by a fox. We can stamp our feet and shout "it's not right", but in a godless

universe there's no-one out there to listen. We're just genetically determined beings on an insignificant planet whose lives don't even register on the cosmic time scale.

We could, of course, set up ourselves as gods of the universe and decide what is good and evil. But as the source of untold evil, we're hardly an improvement on the God we're trying to replace.

The Bible doesn't give a direct answer to the question of why God allows evil to exist, nor even discuss the issue in a philosophical sense. Instead we're given clues through narratives. Sometimes the Bible shows evil and suffering to be the direct result of human activity, at other times they are God's judgment on human sin.

Sometimes innocent people suffer. In the introduction to the book of Job, we're told why God allows Job's suffering, but Job himself is never told. The only answer he receives to his anguished questions "Why me, God?" is "I am God. Trust me."

The key narrative on evil and suffering is the crucifixion. An innocent man, Jesus, was betrayed, falsely tried, mocked, abused, and brutally executed. What good reason could God have for allowing such a thing to happen?

God's answer is "the salvation of the whole world".

Like Job, we often have to trust that a good God must have good reasons for allowing the evil we see and experience. We may eventually understand and be able to say, "Suffering has made me a better person", but sometimes no explanation comes, even in retrospect. Our confidence in God's goodness comes from knowing that he himself has been willing to suffer with us and for us.

26. STAYING POWER

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3:12-13)

Poverty, chastity and obedience are the traditional vows of those entering religious orders. Benedict, however, added a fourth vow for his order—stability. Benedictine monks and nuns are expected to remain within the same community for life.

This might seem strange, even harsh to us. We expect to move house and change jobs several times over a lifetime. Our whole society is hooked on the idea that change is progress. We are enticed and cajoled into changing our clothes, our furniture and our cars, not because the old ones have worn out, but because "new is better".

Current wisdom sees no virtue in staying put. If a relationship is no longer satisfying, leave it and find someone more compatible. If

the church you attend is a bit dreary or disagreeable, try the one down the road. After all, wasn't Jesus himself a wandering preacher with nowhere to lay his head?

What Benedict recognised was that neither true community nor growth of the individual Christian is possible without some stability. This may not necessarily mean living a lifetime in one place. But we should be slow to move unless we have a clear call to do so.

When Jesus told Peter that he should forgive his brother "seventy times seven" (Matt 18:21-22), he was surely implying some sort of long-term relationship between the two. It's relatively easy to forgive a petty offence two or three times. To go on forgiving day after day goes beyond our own resources. Even minor irritations become painful sores if they are constantly renewed. By enduring, we not only learn to forgive as God forgives, but we also learn to rely on God for grace to forgive.

When we first join a community, we are often enthusiastic. Our relationship to others is positive but superficial. People are kind to us because we are new. After a while, we begin to feel disillusioned. We're no longer given special attention. We discover that

these people have all the usual human faults and weaknesses. Sometimes our relationships with others become quite difficult or painful. It is tempting at this stage to leave.

But by leaving we miss the opportunity to become more Christ-like. Love which is patient, not easily angered, keeps no score of wrongs, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres (1 Corinthians 13) takes time and adversity to develop. By moving on, we also miss the opportunity to become part of a community in which we are accepted as we really are.

27. **WHAT DO WE TELL THEM?**

...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15)

Has God ever helped you to find a parking spot? Recently I was browsing through a book written by someone who practised reiki. She recounted how she prayed to "the parking angel" when she needed a parking spot, and more often than not, the "angel" answered her prayer. It gave her positive vibes to be so in tune with the universe.

Have you ever been healed as a result of prayer? The media is full of stories of miraculous healings. They are attributed to everything from medical breakthroughs and wonder diets to healing crystals.

Do you ever feel uplifted and transported by the music as you worship God in church? Others have the same experience listening to Mozart or being part of the crowd at a rock concert.

Does being in the church make you feel part of a family, loved and cared for? Most cults and sects offer the same sense of belonging. In fact, many do it better than some churches.

Where does that leave us as witnesses to Christ? I'm not for a moment suggesting that we shouldn't thank God for his blessings or tell others about them. But God sends his rain on the just and the unjust. There are also many counterfeits to God's blessings. If all we have to witness to is our day-to-day experiences or our feelings, we will have plenty of competition.

In the end, the only unique thing we, as Christians, have to offer people is the hope we have in Christ. Each of us will experience and express that hope in different, personal ways. But it is our hope based on God's promise and the historical fact of Jesus' life, death and resurrection which sets our witness apart.

28. TITANIC

You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. (Psalm 89:9)

"Titanic" was one of the most successful films ever made. Yet despite the romance, it remains the story of a disaster. Why is it so popular?

Perhaps the Titanic is a symbol to which we all relate. So much of what we once considered "unsinkable" is going down around us.

Communism began to sink without a shot being fired. Only in China does it remain, and even there it is unrecognisable, disappearing under waves of free enterprise.

But capitalism itself is listing badly. It promised to take us to a place of prosperity for anyone willing to work. Instead millions of able-bodied people are unemployed. The gap between rich and poor grows wider. Globalisation and economic rationalism close in on us like the cold and dark of the Atlantic night.

It is rumoured that as the Titanic sank, the second class passengers were locked below deck so that the first class passengers would

not have to share the lifeboats. Around the world today, there are groups of people who would like to close their nation's doors against immigrants. The differences between "us" and "them" is deliberately exaggerated by those who feel caught in a struggle for survival.

Chill waters are seeping into society. Violence, drug abuse, broken relationships and suicide are all around us. Like frightened passengers on a ship with too few escape routes, we no longer trust each other.

The earth itself may be a sinking ship. The atmosphere has been changed by pollutants and there are ever-widening gaps in the earth's plant and animal species. The technology we thought would save us is like a ladder that we fall over in the dark.

A few people have gone off in their own little boats, hoping to survive through self-sufficiency when the ship goes down. Others, convinced that what money and technology have created is invincible, go on playing cards as the boat sinks.

This sounds very pessimistic. Perhaps, if we work together, we can save our sinking ships. But the underlying problem remains the same. We have put our trust in the wrong places.

Nothing is "unsinkable" except what God offers us in Jesus. For those who accept Jesus as Saviour, the journey might still be rough, and there may be times when icy waves wash over us. But in the end, He is able to bring us to a safe place. Everything else is like the Titanic.

29. LEAPING IN THE DARK

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

Are you afraid of letting God get a grip on you? Do you stand at a distance, too scared to let him get close? Do you fear what he might do with you, or ask you to do, if you handed over your life to him?

In one sense, we should all be afraid of God. We should never underestimate his power and awesomeness. It is a dreadful thing to fall, unprepared, into the hands of the living God. But it's not this reverent fear which holds many of us back from putting ourselves fully in God's hands. Our fear comes from other sources.

Some fear losing control. They've had unpleasant experiences of being controlled and manipulated by others. Perhaps they've been through a time where life was chaotically out of control and they've vowed (often subconsciously) never to let that happen to them again. They want to believe God can be

trusted, but there's a dreadful emotional barrier in the way.

Some would like to be closer to God, but they're already committed to serving someone or something else—their career, their reputation, their parents or spouse, an ideology, an organization or a secret society. They're unwilling to depose their idol, and God allows no rivals.

Half-heartedness is sometimes a mask for laziness. While I continue to serve God on my terms, I can set limits to how much time and effort I give him. Being a paid servant is one thing, becoming a slave of Christ is quite another. But fear also causes half-heartedness—what if God asked me to do more than I could cope with? What if I never achieve the things I want to achieve because I'm too busy doing God's work?

Satan uses our fears to keep us at a distance from God. He tells us God doesn't have our best interest at heart. He keeps the word "fanatic" fresh in our minds. He holds us over a dark abyss and whispers "This is faith. Do you really want to jump?"

Jesus calls to us, "Follow me". But where? What will happen along the way? Putting all our trust in him can seem like a leap in the

dark, until we understand how he proved his trustworthiness on the cross. If you are afraid to trust your life to God or know that he's asking you to trust him more, talk to another Christian about it and ask them to pray with you. The only truly safe place in the universe is in God's hands.

30. THE GRACE

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

I once attended a church where the minister would bow his head and intone, "The grace of our Lord..." when anyone walked in late, as if the service was about to end. His congregation soon learned to turn up on time! Sometimes the words do seem barely more than a pious version of "See you later".

Yet surely Paul didn't mindlessly scribble down the words simply as a way of ending his letter to the church in Corinth. He wanted the Corinthians to understand that his apparent harshness with them in his previous letter was not meant to bolster his weak authority, but to build them up and make them more Christ-like. He was deeply hurt by their attitude towards him, and the way they were comparing him to the more charismatic "super apostles".

He made no apology for having disciplined them, but he longed for them to demonstrate that they loved him as he loved them, by

living as he had taught them. Rather than concluding simply with "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you", as he did in many of his other letters, he added an even greater blessing, one which we can all use.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: God doesn't offer us a life free from weakness and hardship, but grace to demonstrate His power in our lives. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (1 Cor 12:9). It is the same grace which took Jesus through the weakness of death on the cross to the power of the resurrection and victory over sin.

The love of God: In his previous letter Paul had tried to convince the Corinthian Christians that no matter how important the gifts of the Spirit are to the life of the church, they are useless without love (1 Cor. 13). Now he prays that they will experience the source of that love; God himself.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit: Twice in this letter, Paul refers to the Holy Spirit being given to us as a guarantee of our salvation and future resurrection (1 Cor 1:22, 5:5). To experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is to know the assurance of our place in God's kingdom. Our relationship to other Christians

then becomes something more than just human fellowship. We are bound to each other by a bond stronger than common beliefs or even family relationship—the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

You can find more articles like these on my
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