

## Wednesday 6 February 2008

Ash Wednesday

### Introduction

Today we begin a journey, a journey of transformation. When you set out on a journey, it's a good idea to know where you're heading. So, what is our destination on this journey? How will we know if we're going in the right direction? And what will it be like when we get there? This verse from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians gives some important clues.

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.

**2 Corinthians 3:18**

Change is, of itself, neither good nor bad. It depends on what you're being transformed into and from what. For Christians, the goal of our transformation is to be like Christ. He is the template, the model into which we are being transformed. That is an awesome prospect. Just imagine the impact on our communities of the lives of Christians being transformed to be like Jesus.

But we can't do it on our own. Our light is a reflected light – like that of the moon reflecting the light of the sun. God is the sun – the source of the light. How can we allow the light of God's glory so to shine on us that we reflect it in the world? How can we allow ourselves to be 'transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory'? That is the journey of discovery we embark on today.

### Prayer

Heavenly Father

In the light of your glory, our light seems very dim.  
As we step out on this journey of transforming lives,  
Give us the courage to be willing to be changed,  
And the faith to believe that, by your work in us,  
We may be changed into the likeness of Jesus Christ,  
In whose name we pray. Amen.

## Thursday 7 February 2008

### Transforming Lives – Transforming Communities

Being transformed into the likeness of Christ is not an end in itself. God's vision (and the vision of Transforming Lives) is that transformed lives lead to transformed communities. It's not just a question of being transformed into the likeness of Christ and then leaving it at that.

You are like salt for all mankind. But if salt loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It has become worthless, so it is thrown out and people trample on it. You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lampstand where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.

**Matthew 5:13-16**

It would be very easy for us to look at the world around us, look at our situation in the Church and give up. It all looks so difficult and we are so few. How can we possibly imagine ourselves having a transforming effect on our communities? Yet it doesn't take much salt to season or preserve food, nor does it take a massive light to dispel darkness. Jesus doesn't say 'You ought to be like salt for mankind, light for the whole world'. He says 'You are like salt, like light'.

If we are indeed being transformed to be like Jesus, that will necessarily make an impact on our communities, however few or many we are. But maybe it needs us to change the focus for our concern from inward 'churchy' matters to the communities around us and their desperate needs. After all, which was the focus of Jesus' concern? Salt's not much good if it never leaves the bag! How might you be salt today?!

### Prayer

Loving Lord, we hear your call to be light and salt.  
Shake us from our complacency.  
Lift our horizons.  
Burn in us with your passion for those around us.  
And empower us to be a transforming presence.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Friday 8 February 2008

### *Transforming Lives – Work in Progress*

On our journey we live with the tension between the vision God sets before us – being transformed into the likeness of Christ – and the reality of our lives as they are now. We are all too aware of how far short we fall of being like Christ.

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

**1 John 3:1-2**

Parents often see something of themselves in their children – for better or worse! And others will say ‘Oh, he’s got his father’s eyes’ or ‘his mother’s nose’. But they haven’t yet grown into the people they will one day be.

We will one day be like Jesus, but we’re not there yet. We’re work in progress. But we are his children and glimpses of our parenthood will begin to show through naturally. We mustn’t be too preoccupied with where we are now, analysing and worrying about how we are doing – but instead look at where we’re heading. It’s as we ‘see him as he is’ that we become like him. How can we keep our eyes focussed on Jesus rather than ourselves?

Try to think of one thing you can do, one adjustment you can make to your way of life, which will help to keep your focus on Jesus a bit more.

### *Prayer*

Lord,  
Help us to see you,  
In seeing you to love you,  
In loving you to serve you,  
And in serving you to become like you.  
Amen.

## Saturday 9 February 2008

### *Transforming Lives – Grow young*

We are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus – yet paradoxically, he invites us to become like a little child, holding out children as the model for those who would enter the kingdom of heaven.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”.

**Matthew 18:1-4**

I wonder what it is about the little child that Jesus sees as the model for the kingdom. We’re usually encouraged in the Bible to become mature in Christ, to grow up – yet here is Jesus telling us to grow young. What things do we see in Jesus that are childlike? How might becoming like a little child also mean becoming like Jesus?

Jesus singles out the humility of a child – is that the key? What might it mean for my life to ‘change and become like a little child’? What things might hinder me and need dealing with?

### *Prayer*

Lord,  
break through my pride and grown-up-ness,  
and help me grow young. Amen.

## Sunday 10 February 2008

*The First Sunday of Lent*

### *Choosing God's Way: Choose Life*

Fed up with all the telecoms and power companies that have rung you up recently wanting to know if you will choose them? Stumped by the number of television channels on offer? Ever marvelled at the number of brands of tomato soup? Been bamboozled by the vastness of the internet?

If any of those questions leaves you with a knowing smile then you may be a sufferer of choice fatigue. In today's high-tech, advertising mad world there seem to be a legion of voices crying out, 'Choose!' It doesn't matter what you choose just so long as you accept the rules of the game: choice is good, the more choice the better, it's time to choose again etc.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

**Deuteronomy 30:17-20**

In Deuteronomy, God asks his people not just to choose, but to make the right choice, a good choice. God knows that we all have our gods and idols, the things that deep down we worship and serve. But he asks us to make the one choice that really matters: to choose to worship him and to choose the life and the blessings he longs to give.

Do you think there are choices you make that you need to think about again? Do the choices you make suggest that deep down there are other things you worship and serve? Do you think that will make a difference to your relationship to God and to other people around you?

### *Prayer*

God of blessing, give us the grace to love and serve you with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and so to know your life abundantly. Amen.

## Monday 11 February 2008

### *Choosing God's Way: Do not bring us to the time of trial*

Have you given something up for Lent? Have you already been tempted sneakily to try a little bit of chocolate, a cup of coffee...? Or, if you've taken something on, have you been tempted to sleep in instead of studying your Bible, do the shopping rather than going to visit someone...?

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

**Luke 11:1-4**

We all know what temptation is like. We say that it's part of being human. But some temptations are harder to deal with than others. Jesus was tempted to tread a different path, to rule worldly kingdoms and to show off his divinity. Would he become the ultimate celebrity and let the bright lights of fame and renown and the love of power cloud his judgement?

Of course, Jesus didn't give in to temptation. It might be human to be tempted but to be truly human is not to give in. But we all do. We all fail to live up to what we could be - as fully human as Jesus. The good news is that in the prayer Jesus taught us, forgiveness comes before temptation. God forgives us our lapses, as we must forgive others. And then, when God's dealt with our last trespass we ask him to save us from the next temptation.

Perhaps there are temptations that recur for you. What are they? How might you avoid them? Who could help you and have you talked to someone about them? Are you good at asking for forgiveness? Remember that even on the cross Jesus was willing to forgive.

### *Prayer*

*Spend some time with the Lord's Prayer, repeating it and allowing God to speak through it to you.*

## Tuesday 12 February 2008

### *Choosing God's Way: Jesus has been there too*

Has anyone ever put you down and made what you are saying seem trivial or boring by saying, 'Been there, seen that, got the T-shirt.' Sometimes, however, it's no bad thing to be following in someone else's footsteps.

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death... Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

**Hebrews 2:14-18**

When God asks us to choose his way and to follow him, he's inviting us to walk the same path as him. It's more like sharing a journey than setting off alone into the unknown. And it's a path that Jesus has travelled before.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews helps us to remember that Jesus really was one of us. He came to share everything with us – our flesh and blood and eventually even our death. There was no better way for him to defeat death than by dying like us and by showing us that life always triumphs. There was no better way for him to help us overcome the tests and trials of life than by being tested as we are, and so proving that God's way magnificently overcomes all things.

Are there people who help you on your journey and help you to keep to God's path? Give thanks for the companions in the faith that you know and have known. Choosing God's path shouldn't be a lonely choice. If it feels that way, is there someone who can accompany you? Jesus has been there too and he has the scars to prove it, but rejoice for they are healed!

### *Prayer*

Lord Jesus, you came to be one of us so that we might become like you. Transform us into your likeness and when times are trying send us companions for the way. Amen.

## Wednesday 13 February 2008

### *Choosing God's Way: Don't Worry*

'Don't worry, be happy!' so they say. But is it really as easy as all that?

Jesus said, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

**Matthew 6:25-27, 31-33**

Jesus doesn't say that life is easy. He's not so happy-go-lucky that he thinks you can wish your woes away. But he knows that it is easy for people to get themselves in a muddle when they're worrying about all the wrong things. Remember the rich young man whose possessions are the last thing which he needs to let go of before he can put God first? He walks away sad (Luke 18:18-25). Jesus reminds us that life is more than what we have, what we wear and what we eat. If we worry about things like this, what does it say about our priorities, about our choices? What if we strive for the kingdom as our first goal, to be in a right relationship with God first and foremost? Would that put everything else in perspective?

What does this passage say to us, who generally have all we need, about those who do have to worry about where the next meal will come from? If we strive for God's kingdom, what should be our response to them?

### *Prayer*

Creator God, you feed the birds and dress the fields so beautifully, yet you love us infinitely more than them. Free us from anxiety and so free us to work for the building of your kingdom and the transforming of your world. Amen.

## Thursday 14 February 2008

*St Valentine's Day*

### *Choosing God's way: Choose Love*

God's way is to love, and he expressed his love by sending Jesus so that we might share in God's life of love (John 3:16).

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

**Romans 12:9-16a, 18, 21**

Love isn't just about love songs and candle-lit dinners for two. When Paul starts talking about love, genuine love, he just can't stop! Re-read the passage above and count the number of things that having genuine love will entail.

Love transforms. It changes us and it changes communities. What a wonderful vision Paul presents of the Christian church. If the church really lived up to this vision what an effect it would have on the world! What if we overcame evil with good rather than seeking revenge? What if we rejoiced with those who rejoiced and wept with those who wept? If we had love like this then truly everyone would know that we were disciples of Jesus (John 13:34-35). Who wouldn't want to be a part of this!

Think of some of the activities and practices in your church that reflect this love. What examples of such love can you see in the church throughout the world? Let us rejoice in the love that God has shown us and rejoice to show others that love in our lives!

### *Prayer*

Loving God, teach us that most excellent way, the way of love. Amen.

## Friday 15 February 2008

### *Choosing God's Way: Putting things in perspective*

'It's time to turn over a new leaf', 'to begin again with a clean slate', '...a blank sheet.' 'Let's put it behind us and start afresh.' 'We've binned what we were doing and now we're looking ahead, looking forward.' These are phrases that suggest an exciting new phase of our lives ahead.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

**Philippians 3:7-12**

Things have been put in perspective for Paul. Whatever gains and advantages his old life gave him seem as nothing in comparison with his new life in Christ. He's made a choice to follow Jesus or, more properly, Jesus chose him and made him his own. Paul, literally dazzled by Jesus, now presses on to become as like Jesus as he can.

If you want to press on and know Jesus and to know the power of his resurrection what things might you have to count as loss? What might you have to bin as rubbish to live the new life? What might it cost you? But what would be the rewards?

### *Prayer*

Heavenly Father, your Son Jesus claims us for his own.

Help us to live as his disciples and to bear the sign of the cross so that we might now live his risen life.

Make us unafraid to confess the faith of Christ crucified, lead us by his light and restore in us the image of his glory. Amen.

## Saturday 16 February 2008

### *Choosing God's Way: God is faithful*

What do you turn to when the going gets tough? What or who is your first port of call in a storm?

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.

**1 Corinthians 10:13-14**

Again and again in the letters to the Corinthians Paul warns us of the dangers of worshipping idols. It's not just that it's pointless because there's nothing there behind the idol to help us. There's more to it than that. It sounds strange to say, but we become like what we worship. What we worship will have very real effects on the way we live our lives.

So Paul counsels us to flee from idols. Who needs them, he says? However much you're tested, remember that we've all been there. But more importantly remember that, unlike an empty idol, our God is faithful. He is committed to you. All that he has done and will do, he has done and will do for you. If things are difficult, choose to stick with him just as he has always stuck by you.

The more time we spend in the company of the living God, the more like him we will become. What an encouragement to choose God's way!

### *Prayer*

Almighty and everlasting God,  
we thank you that you have brought us safely to this day.  
Keep us from falling into sin  
or running into danger,  
order us in all our doings  
and guide us to do always  
what is righteous in your sight;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Sunday 17 February 2008

### *The Second Sunday of Lent*

### *New life in Christ: 'Born from above and not below'*

Do you wince when someone introduces themselves as a 'born again Christian? Perhaps we wonder if we are as 'properly saved'. Are our Christian credentials as good? What does Jesus mean when he talks of being 'born again'?

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit'.

**John 3:1-6**

Nicodemus had good religious credentials: he was a Jewish leader, a learned teacher, a respected figure in his community and probably very sure of his place in God's kingdom. But Jesus points to the heart of what will truly enable entrance into God's kingdom.

Jesus' teaching points to the need for a new spiritual birth 'for all', irrespective of birth, breeding or brains. It is the work of the Spirit of God to bring us into this new birth with its promise of new life in Christ.

In the opening chapter of John's gospel (1:12-13) we find the key to it happening for us: 'To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God'. We thank God for his grace at work in our lives, as we become part of a new family.

### *Prayer*

Heavenly Father, thank you that as we put our faith in Jesus, we find new life in Christ; a spiritual re-birth that is your gift to us, when we open our hearts and lives to the work of your Spirit in us. Amen.

## Monday 18 February 2008

### *New life in Christ: World focused not other worldly!*

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.' (John 3.16) God sent his son as the saviour of the world. We can know and believe the love God has for us, but we need to keep the focus bigger than just 'me and my faith'.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

**1 John 4:14-18**

Dare we ask the question, what is the point of personal faith? Perhaps our faith and beliefs matter most when they engage us in the work of saving the world – we become part of what God is doing to 'rebirth' the world into new life.

Where do we start? With our own transformation from 'fear filled' living to 'love filled' giving. What causes us to fear in our world? How does that fear tempt us to take refuge in an 'other worldly' faith that is turned in on itself and its own concerns?

Take these words from our reading to heart, 'as he is, so are we in this world.' He is 'perfect love' that casts out fear. As the love of God transforms our fear and uncertainty, we are better able to give ourselves to the task of loving and serving the world.

### *Prayer*

We go into the world  
to walk in God's light,  
to rejoice in God's love  
and to reflect God's glory. Amen.

## Tuesday 19 February 2008

### *New life in Christ: From learn-ed to learner*

'Life long learning' is a buzz word in our society today. One could argue that when healthy human beings cease to be open to learning of any kind, they are closing down the possibility of reaching their full potential. We close down our spiritual potential also when we stop learning.

The Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you.

**John 5:37-42**

One of the challenges that Jesus constantly faced in his ministry was to encourage those who knew their scriptures, who worshipped regularly and who lived godly lives to be open to learn new insights.

One hallmark of true discipleship is to see the life of faith as ongoing learning. Jesus encouraged questions. He often responded not with answers, but with even more questions to go away and ponder. Jesus also used stories and parables to tease and challenge people into fresh insights about the life of the kingdom.

Those he calls to be his disciples shouldn't aim to be learn-ed and full of answers to life's questions, but 'life long learners'. That is people who retain an openness to refreshing and deepening the truth as they have received it. Beyond Lent, will you find new opportunities to go on learning as a Christian disciple? How will you make sure that happens?

### *Prayer*

God our judge and saviour,  
teach us to be open to your truth  
and to trust in your love,  
that each day we may grow  
in our understanding and love for you,  
and your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Wednesday 20 February 2008

*New life in Christ: From 'belief about' to 'belief in'*

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.

**Colossians 2:6-10**

Don't get too worried about knowing exactly what 'philosophies', 'deceits, or 'human traditions' Paul is referring to in this passage. In every time and place people have beliefs about all sorts of things to do with life, the universe and its meaning.

In our 'post modern' world it is fashionable to believe what we want – truth is as we perceive it. It seems that what one person believes to be true is no better than what the next believes to be true – or so they say!

For the Christian, truth involves certain beliefs about the universe, life and its meaning. But the most profound truths are discovered only in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

The new life that we have in Christ is primarily about 'belief in God' and not 'belief about God'. It involves the whole of who we are, being caught up in relationship with Christ. 'Rooted' in Christ describes the foundation of our lives and faith. 'Built up in him' describes our ongoing and continuous growth into the likeness of Christ. This is the calling of every Christian.

'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). How does that feel? What difference does it make to your day?

### *Prayer*

Lord Jesus, thank you that I can live my life in such close relationship to you. By your Spirit, lead me, all of me, mind, body, soul and will, more fully into your presence. Amen.

## Thursday 21 February 2008

*New life in Christ: 'Living a lie or living the life'.*

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other... Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.

**Galatians 5:16-17, 6:7-9**

So often in Paul's writings 'flesh' and 'Spirit' are in opposition to each other. What does he mean by this? For Paul to 'live by the Spirit' is to live by our true identity: 'for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.' (Gal 3:27) Is our identity and way of life that of a true child of God? Are we indwelt and governed by the Spirit or have we believed the lie that says we cannot be anything other than slaves to the 'desires of the flesh'?

The Galatian Christians knew the battle. They knew also Paul's teaching 'for freedom, Christ has set us free.' (5:1) Paul is speaking about the need to face up to what truly and deeply motivates our actions and behaviours, influences the principles and values we hold, and directs our energies and consumes most of our resources.

Where are we 'sowing to the flesh?' How might we better 'sow to the Spirit' in our being and doing? What kind of harvest do we see in our daily lives? Paul has a check list in the second half of chapter 5. You may like to ponder on the list before praying.

### *Prayer*

God of our salvation,  
help us to turn away from those habits which harm our bodies  
and poison our minds  
and to choose again your gift of life,  
revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Friday 22 February 2008

### *New life in Christ: 'The Giver that goes on giving'*

Jesus' teaching, here in John's Gospel, finds its fulfilment at Pentecost when the promised gift of the Spirit came powerfully upon the believers gathered in Jerusalem. Peter was quick to remind the crowds that in the Old Testament God had promised to 'pour out his Spirit upon all flesh.'

Jesus said, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me... Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father... And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.'

**John 14:1, 12, 16-17**

The ongoing gift of the Spirit is just what we need for us to live as Christians. The Spirit is both with us and within us, enabling us to do the works that Jesus did on earth. It is as the church continues Christ's ministry on earth that it discovers the resources of the Spirit to fulfil its mission. Left to our own human resources our churches can be significant institutions and important places of belonging, but they are unlikely to speak words of life, live out truth that sets people free or offer worship to God that is 'in spirit and in truth.'

Jesus said 'apart from me you can do nothing.' The Spirit makes us a 'part' of Christ. If the Spirit is enlivening us, our churches will come alive also with the love and power of the gospel! When Christians gather together, the Holy Spirit can be amazingly present, so that we can be sent out 'in the power of the Spirit to live and work to God's praise and glory.'

### *Prayer*

God the giver of life,  
whose Holy Spirit wells up within your church:  
by the Spirit's gifts equip us to live the gospel of Christ and make us eager to do your will that we may share with the whole creation the joys of eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.

## Saturday 23 February 2008

### *New life in Christ: 'Food that satisfies'*

Many Bible commentators believe these words of Jesus in John's gospel refer to the Eucharist or Holy Communion.

Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty... Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.'

**John 6:35, 54-57**

To participate in this eating and drinking, as we do in our churches and homes, is to become one with Christ in a truly mysterious way. At every celebration of the Eucharist, we are invited to be renewed in that life-giving relationship. We are reminded that 'eternal life' is not only a future reality, but a present one also. Participating in the eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood not only satisfies our deepest spiritual needs, ('never be hungry... never be thirsty') but sustains and directs us in our ongoing discipleship.

We are sent out from the service to live out our faith in the world, mindful that Christ offered his own life as the way of sorting the world's problems and bringing it to God. Those who share in the bread and wine have the life of Christ renewed within them. As we 'make our communion' we are nourished so we can go out to serve Christ. Our participation in the Eucharistic meal should not just be about a religious habit, but rather be an engagement with and an exploration of the deepest mystery of God and his grace, as the prayer below reminds us.

### *Prayer*

May we who share Christ's body live his risen life  
we who drink his cup bring life to others;  
we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world.  
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us,  
So we and all your children shall be free.  
and the whole earth live to praise your name. Amen.

## Sunday 24 February 2008

### *How is Jesus changing us?*

A lot of people think religion is just about outward practice – if you're a Christian (or a member of another religion) you do this and don't do that. But the Christian faith is different – it works from the inside out.

Jesus said to the woman, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.

The water that I will give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life".

**John 4:13-14**

Here is the power source for the Christian life. The key to transforming lives and transforming communities is the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit. He is the one who can become in us a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. All we're asked to do is drink. The question is – are we thirsty? Do we long to see more of God at work in our lives and in our communities? Or are we too easily content with things as they are?

God longs for us to be hungry and thirsty, to be filled with a godly discontent that drives us to seek more of Him and His power. He can't do anything in the lives of those who are complacent or self-satisfied. We need to pray that God will give us a thirst – and then just drink.

The well is open!

### *Prayer*

Lord, forgive us the times when we too easily accept things as they are.

Give us a godly discontent and make us thirsty for more of you in our lives and in our communities.

Thank you that the living water of your Spirit is available to us. Help us to drink. Amen.

## Monday 25 February 2008

### *How is Jesus changing our outlook?*

If our lives are to be transformed, our outlook must be transformed – what we value and think important, our priorities and the way we use our time, money and energy.

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

**Colossians 3:1-4**

A transformed outlook is one that points in a new direction – in this case, upwards. We are to set our hearts on 'things above' not on 'earthly things'. For most of us that is a radical challenge to our way of thinking. It stems from a new understanding about ourselves. We have died with Christ upon the cross – it was in our place that Jesus died, so, in a sense, we died with him. And when he rose from death, we rose with him to new life. This new life has a new orientation. We are no longer our own, we are Christ's and the direction of our life is now his direction.

Have a think about your values and priorities. What drives you? What do you think is important? Be honest. Are your values Jesus' values? Is your heart set on 'things above' – or on 'earthly things'? How might that be changed?

And don't be fooled into thinking that setting our minds on 'things above' means becoming other-worldly and detached from this world – quite the reverse. Those whose minds are set on 'things above' find they are even more concerned for this world – but from a different perspective, a heavenly perspective.

### *Prayer*

Lord, search me and know my thoughts.

Show me where my heart is set on earthly things.

Help me to know that I have died and my life is now hidden with Christ, And change my heart so that it is set on things above, For your name and your glory's sake. Amen.

## Tuesday 26 February 2008

### *How is Jesus changing our attitudes?*

Today's passage is taken from the parable of the Good Samaritan, one of the best known stories in the Bible. You probably know it, but, even so, try and find time to read the whole story at some point today, if you can (Luke 10:25-37). There's not room for it all here.

The teacher of the law wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbour?"

Jesus answered, "There was once a man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers attacked him, stripped him and beat him up, leaving him half dead..."

And Jesus concluded, "In your opinion, which one of these three acted like a neighbour towards the man attacked by the robbers?" The teacher of the law answered, "The one who was kind to him." Jesus replied, "You go, then, and do the same."

**Luke 10:29-30, 36-37**

We are so familiar with the story of the good Samaritan that we miss just how shocking it must have been for those who first heard it. A Samaritan of all people as the hero of the story! They were the Jewish people's historical enemies and utterly beyond the pale. A good Jew would spit contemptuously if one was even mentioned. But Jesus is not afraid to challenge deeply held prejudices. If a Samaritan is my neighbour, whom I must love...? The implications are staggering. But are we free from similar prejudices? How do we feel about asylum seekers, Muslims, young people, old people, rich people, poor people, southerners... The list could go on.

The command to love God and our neighbour stands today against all our prejudices, inherited or learnt. Our attitudes badly need transforming. How much are your opinions and attitudes formed by prayer and listening to God through the Bible – and how much by the media and other people's opinions? Which should be the greater influence?

### *Prayer*

Lord we all fall short of your command to love God and our neighbour. Forgive us and change us, we pray.  
Help us to see others as you see them and to overcome our prejudices.  
Amen.

## Wednesday 27 February 2008

### *How is Jesus changing our worship?*

Most of us would agree that the most important thing we do as Christians is worship. But how often do we think about what worship is? Is it just about going to Church on Sunday – or is there more to it than that?

Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

**Joel 2:12-13**

The Old Testament prophets, like Joel, were very hot on outward religious observance that wasn't matched by what was happening inside worshippers' hearts and so in their daily life. Worship is about an attitude of heart before anything else. Worship is about a right attitude towards God – giving him his 'worth-ship'. From that flows a right attitude to others. If our relationship with God isn't right, that will affect our worship when we meet together. So, if we're not happy with the worship we experience in our Church, perhaps we should look inward into our own hearts first. Is there baggage we are bringing with us that's not helpful? Are we right with God and others – or are we bringing anger, resentment or unforgiveness with us?

Joel invites us to examine our hearts and come back to the Lord, to pour out our hearts to him and get back into a right relationship with him. He's there waiting for us. That's where true worship begins.

### *Prayer*

Lord, as I come to you today, I'm not going to pretend. You know all the thoughts in my heart already. You know me as I really am, not what I let others see.  
Lord, I want to do some serious business with you today. I bring to you those attitudes that I know aren't right. I'm sorry, Lord. I come to you and lay them before you. Please forgive me and make me new. Thank you that I know that I can come to you as I am and find your love waiting for me.  
Amen.

## Thursday 28 February 2008

### *How is Jesus changing our view of ourselves?*

Today's reading is part of a longer story that's not so well known. If you can, read the whole story from Mark's Gospel (Mark 5:1-20) about Jesus' encounter with the man called 'Legion' (or 'Mob'), because of the large number of demons in him, and see how the man was transformed by the encounter.

Jesus and his disciples arrived on the other side of Lake Galilee, in the territory of Gerasa. As soon as Jesus got out of the boat, he was met by a man who came out of the burial caves there. This man had an evil spirit in him and lived among the tombs... Day and night he wandered among the tombs and through the hills, screaming and cutting himself with stones...

...and when they came to Jesus, they saw the man who used to have the mob of demons in him. He was sitting there, clothed and in his right mind.

**Mark 5:1-2, 15-20**

Not many of us are in quite such a bad way as this man was at the beginning of the story! He was definitely someone you would go a long way to avoid. Yet by the end of the story there he is sitting quietly, clothed and in his right mind. That's what meeting Jesus does for us – puts us in our right mind. Paradoxically, being transformed into the likeness of Christ makes us more truly ourselves, more truly as God intends us to be.

Do you have things in you that stop you from being the person God wants you to be – perhaps things from your past? How do you feel about yourself? Are you able to think positively about yourself, or are there voices in you that whisper that you're not really very good? Bring them consciously to Jesus and ask him to put you into your 'right mind'. He may not heal you as dramatically and suddenly as he did 'Legion', but he can change us and restore our view of ourselves to make it whole and healthy.

### *Prayer*

Lord, thank you that you see me as I am,  
And love me as I am.

Thank you that you can put me into my 'right mind'.

Help me see myself as you see me and know that I am loved. Amen.

## Friday 29 February 2008

### *How is Jesus changing our conversation?*

So much of how we relate to one another is affected by what we say. One hurtful word can cause so much damage. And taking the courage to say the right thing at the right time can bring so much healing. What are our conversations like and are they any different within the Christian community from the rest of the world around?

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

**Ephesians 4:29-32**

"Transformed lives lead to transformed communities". That's been a running theme in these notes. A transformed community should be different and that difference should show particularly in our conversations. What are the conversations like in your Church, in your family, in your neighbourhood? Are they characterised by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness? Or are they rather full of grumbling, gossip and unkindness! Sadly the latter often seem to be all too present in our churches.

Think for a moment about the last few conversations you've had with fellow Church members. Bring them consciously into God's presence. How do they look in that light? Are there things you maybe need to confess and put right? If so, do something about it. Don't miss this chance to bring some healing into the conversations of your Church community. And, of course, this doesn't just apply within the Church. It should apply to all our conversations. But it should start within the community that is consciously being transformed by Christ, that is, the Church.

### *Prayer*

Lord, take our lips and speak through them,

Take our minds and think through them,

Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. Amen.

## Saturday 1 March 2008

### *How is Jesus changing our community?*

The Christian community, that is, the Church, should be a community which models the transformation we've been thinking about. In other words, the Church should be like Christ and, as a result, a transforming presence in the community within which it is set.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

**Acts 4:32-35**

What a wonderful picture of Christ-like community! No wonder that the early Christian Church made such an impact on the community around it. Is part of the reason that we don't make such an impact nowadays that we've lost the freshness, the vibrancy and, above all, the generosity of that early Church? Could we get it back again? How might we start? Do we see signs of it stirring in our churches? Could 'Transforming Lives' be part of that process?

It's tempting to think that we can't do anything about it, that it's all the fault of others – our history, the hierarchy, the clergy, the PCC... But why shouldn't it start with me? Are there ways that I can be changed that would begin to make a difference to our Church, and thus to the wider community? Read through the passage again slowly and thoughtfully and ask God to show you if there is something there that you can respond to.

### *Prayer (from a prayer of Saint Francis)*

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love, where there is injury, pardon,  
Where there is discord, vision, where there is doubt, faith,  
Where there is despair, hope, where there is darkness, light,  
Where there is sadness, joy. Amen.

## Sunday 2 March 2008

### *The Fourth Sunday of Lent*

### *Glory revealed & glory opposed*

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.' And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

**Luke 2:28-35**

What a destiny. Jesus was destined to be like a wall on which the seas of public opinion would break. No-one who came across him would be unaffected. Whether they recognised his importance, like old Simeon and Anna, or whether they opposed him, like the religious leaders of the day, Jesus would reveal the inner secrets of all their hearts. There is no neutral ground – you are either for him or against him. He is too important to allow any sitting on the fence. This baby would be a challenge to all.

But this was a destiny that would come at a cost. In the end, Jesus would be handed over by the religious authorities to the Roman authorities, to the royal court and back again, before finally being put at the mercy of the mob. Humanity would show itself in all its guises to be unable to cope with such a man, such a God. No-one would own him. Even Peter would deny him. But some stood faithful at the foot of the cross and watched him die – the sword that pierced Mary's heart.

Where would you have been?

### *Prayer*

Forgiving God,  
help us, Mary-like, to remain faithful to you  
even when everyone seems to oppose us and it seems too much to bear.  
Enable our souls to proclaim your greatness  
and our spirits to rejoice in you, our Saviour, whatever the cost. Amen.

## Monday 3 March 2008

### *Hard words – Jesus brings a sword*

'What if Jesus really meant what he said?' Just think about that. What a difference that might make to the way we think and what we do. No more explaining him away, hedging our bets and hoping we've got it right. What if...

Jesus said, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

**Matthew 10:34-39**

What if he really meant what he said? These are such hard words. Did Jesus really come to bring a sword – an instrument that divides and cuts? Did he come to set us against our own families, our households and our communities? We've already heard that the coming of Jesus could never leave us indifferent. He didn't come to bring the kind of peace that the world is resigned to accept but something so much more radical. So radical, in fact, that it could divide us and cut across even the most intimate relationships. To follow Jesus is to follow him all the way, to put him first in all things. It is to lose our lives in order to find a new life in him.

Does Jesus say that we can't love our family? Can we love God and our family as well? Is it easier to love others if God is our first love? Can God teach us how to be better lovers of others? How would that relate to the idea that we might find our life by loving others and losing our own lives for Jesus' sake?

### *Prayer*

Father of all, pour your love into our hearts and fill us with a passionate desire for you. In so loving you may we come to know what it means to love others fully. Make us like Jesus who loved you and all people. Amen.

## Tuesday 4 March 2008

### *Jesus brings peace*

'What if Jesus really meant what he did?' Or to put it another way, what if Jesus did what he did because he knew what a difference it would make?

For Jesus is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

**Ephesians 2:14-18**

Jesus came to divide what needed to be divided. He came to break us out of our complacency. He came to destroy all the things that hold us back from knowing and loving our God. Of course what Jesus came to break apart wasn't a peaceful world but a world already full of divisions and barriers and walls. The world might think this is peace but is it? Isn't it just holding the chaos at bay? Recently, we've watched a wall being built between Israel and Palestine. Do you think it will bring peace?

At the cross Jesus destroyed all the barriers between us. He showed us that we share a common humanity. He reconciled us to one another and to God. He sent his Spirit that we might all have access to the One God.

What barriers do we put up to isolate ourselves from others? What might we need Jesus to break down in order to bring us closer to others?

### *Prayer*

O God, you are the author of peace and lover of concord,  
to know you is eternal life,  
to serve you is perfect freedom.  
Defend us from ourselves when we seek to build walls  
that separate and divide.  
Make us one in your Son Jesus  
by the power of your Spirit. Amen.

## Wednesday 5 March 2008

### *We are family*

If Jesus did come to bring a new kind of peace, what would it look like?  
How could we experience it?

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

**Mark 3:31-35**

Does this passage make you uncomfortable? How cold Jesus seems renouncing his own family. As always, Jesus uses the situation he is in to make a powerful point.

How would you define a family? How does Jesus define it? Does your church feel like an extended family to you? What could you do to make it more like a family?

Jesus seems to be saying that the peace he brings is only found in good relationships, when everyone is like a cherished member of the family. We can't know peace in the abstract. Rather, peace is something we find in and through others. Peace is something real, it's tangible and we know it by loving our family, whether they're related to us by the ties of blood or spirit.

### *Prayer*

God of compassion, whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary, shared the life of a home in Nazareth, and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself: strengthen us in our daily living that in joy and sorrow we may know the power of your presence to bind together and to heal; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.

## Thursday 6 March 2008

### *Children of God*

Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Mark 10:15). What sort of viewpoint do you have as a little child?

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

**Romans 8:14-17**

As Christians we all pray the Lord's prayer which we address to our Father in heaven. It is a sign that we must be part of the same family – all of us have been adopted and have become children of God. Paul draws out what this might mean. If we're children then we're also heirs. And if Jesus was the Son of God then we must also be joint heirs with him. And so, if we're like Jesus, then we may have to suffer with him but we'll also be glorified with him. It's like suddenly finding out that you've been written into the best will that there could ever be.

We have already thought about what becoming child-like might mean. Is it any easier to think about that knowing that the church is made up of your brothers and sisters? Do any of them, of whatever age, help you to understand what it means? How does it feel knowing that Jesus is also our joint heir? What does it mean for the Holy Spirit to bear witness with our spirit that we are children of God? Can the Spirit help us when it is difficult to see God as our Father and our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters?

### *Prayer*

Eternal God, you came to us as the newborn baby of Bethlehem and grew as a child in Nazareth. Teach us to be as children, puncture our pomposity and remove our pretensions. Help us to remember how to play, and make us wise by making us fools for you. Amen.

## Friday 7 March 2008

### *Gently does it*

It is almost inevitable in everything that we do that at some point along the line we will meet someone who has a different viewpoint from us. However, that difference can turn into disagreement and disagreement can in turn become out and out conflict. What happens then?

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.

**Galatians 5:14, 22-6.2**

Perhaps it wouldn't take long for you to identify some areas of disagreement in your church. You would also have to be very fortunate not to have been involved in or witnessed some real conflict there too. Paul, who knows plenty about quarrels and fallings-out (just read the whole of the letter to the Galatians to see), also knows that what should make us different as Christians is the way we deal with disputes and conflicts.

The secret is allowing the Spirit in. How many of the fruits of the Spirit do you see in your own dealings with those who differ in opinion from you? How many of those fruits do you need to pray for? How many disagreements that you see stem from competitiveness and envy rather than from a love of the truth?

What is Paul's recommendation for dealing with someone who really has gone too far? Is this different to the way the world deals with clashes when people are at odds?

### *Prayer*

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people,  
and kindle in us the fire of your love;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Saturday 8 March 2008

### *Different is good*

Does having a different viewpoint necessarily lead to conflict? Can you be united if you differ in the way you see things? When does difference become creative instead of destructive?

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

**1 Corinthians 12:7, 12-13**

The Spirit is generous. To everyone is given a gift for the good of everyone. God doesn't seem interested in making us all the same. He is a God of abundance and diversity. What God means by saying we should be one doesn't seem to involve uniformity, as if we were all clones of one another. Rather, it's about being unified; about differences coming together to make something creative. If you think about it, the best way to be truly one is for the church to encompass all the good differences that make us who we are. Otherwise, dare we say it, it wouldn't be so much fun and just a touch boring...

What differences can you celebrate in your family, your church and your community? In what ways do differences lead to creativity and innovation? What do you think your particular gift(s) might be? If the whole body needs you for it to be whole then what do you think God is calling you to offer? How do differences enhance our common life?

### *Prayer*

Almighty and eternal God,  
you have revealed yourself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
and live and reign in the perfect unity of love:  
hold us firm in this faith  
that we may know you in all your ways  
and evermore rejoice in your eternal glory,  
who are three Persons yet one God,  
now and for ever. Amen.

## Sunday 9 March 2008

*The Fifth Sunday of Lent*

*Hope in the pain of life: Do you believe this?*

When did you last think or say, 'If only...' – expressing a deep regret that something might have turned out differently?

Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

**John 11:21-27**

The death of Martha's brother leads her to utter her own 'If only...' She directs her thoughts, not into a vacuum of wishful thinking but at Jesus, her Lord. Rather than leave Martha stuck in what has been, terrible as it is, Jesus, by his response, draws out from her a belief in future hope. He then locates that hope as something that begins and finds a reality in the present. Later in the gospel story Lazarus is brought to life again – a sign to show that in Jesus resurrection and eternal life begin in the here and now.

'Resurrection' isn't just a doctrine, it is a person. Jesus says 'I am the resurrection.' As he stands before Martha she is invited to exchange her 'if only...' of regret for a confidence that things can look and be different when we trust in who Jesus is and what he will accomplish.

Martha came to Jesus and so must we if we are to find good news, hope and new possibilities for living in the midst of our anguished 'If only's'.

### *Prayer*

Lord Jesus, I bring to you the 'If only...' that casts its shadow over today. May who you are, and what you promise, make future hope present today. Help me to place my trust in you alone. Amen.

## Monday 10 March 2008

*Hope in the pain of life: Out of the depths I cry to you!*

What brings you to cry out to God from the depths of your being? A deep concern for those you love who are in distress of some sort? The unrelenting pressures of life that affect you personally? Maybe the painful recollection of sinful thoughts and actions – a 'spiritual pain' that causes you distress and leads to a longing for the assurance of forgiveness? The psalmist knew that reality and his prayer may help us as we he cries out to God.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

**Psalm 130**

The psalmist's prayer becomes ours... we are in the depths. Our guilt is before us. We cry to God, and He hears us and comes, not with judgment but with forgiveness. Our hope and trust is that God is with us – with us in the deepest depths, in our greatest humiliations and our bitterest sorrows. God is with us to forgive and save, to strengthen and comfort.

The 'forgiveness'... 'steadfast love'... and 'great power to redeem' that the psalmist experienced now finds its fullness in Jesus. 'In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us'. (Eph 1:7)

### *Prayer*

Lord, when we are in the depths, hear our cry for mercy, and lavish your grace upon us through the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## Tuesday 11 March 2008

### *Hope in the pain of life: Cosmic pain!*

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**Romans 8:18-25**

We're in it together! The story of Genesis 3, on which Paul here draws, captures the reality of a disordered creation bound up with human choices and actions.

We recognise how relations between God, ourselves and the created order can seem to be out of joint – how the whole created order, of which we are a part, struggles to attain the good purposes for which God intended.

Woven into the Jewish teaching that informed Paul's writing was an expectation that the created order would be renewed. Paul calls for hope to be rekindled in the face of a 'groaning creation' that is moving towards a new age. God's children have already begun to experience that inner renewal as 'the first fruits of the Spirit' – our true identity is being revealed. The 'glorious freedom' that we are discovering has implications for the transformation of the whole of creation.

As consumers, do the choices that we make as part of our daily living contribute to the flourishing of all God's creation? Where might we be adding to its decay?

### *Prayer*

Heavenly Lord, you long for the world's salvation: stir us from apathy, restrain us from excess and revive in us new hope that all creation will one day be healed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Wednesday 12 March 2008

### *Hope in the pain of life: Trying to make sense of it all?*

When life becomes dark and difficult for whatever reason – health, family, work, friends, finances, community struggles, national issues or global fears – we try and make sense of it all.

My eye has grown dim from grief, and all my members are like a shadow... My days are past, my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart. They make night into day; "The light", they say, "is near to the darkness." If I look for Sheol as my house, if I spread my couch in darkness, if I say to the Pit, "You are my father", and to the worm, "My mother", or "My sister", where then is my hope? Who will see my hope? Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust?... For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth.

**Job 17:7, 11-16, 19:25**

Job tries to make sense of the terrible realities that have befallen him - the loss of children, health and wealth, along with the emotional, mental and spiritual pain that accompany such suffering. Is this suffering the result of his sin? Does it mean that he has fallen out of God's favour? Job tries to understand his pain and wonders how and where God is present. He fears loss of hope, and is not helped by his not-very-helpful friends who only increase his misery and confusion.

Job doesn't find answers for the contradictions and confusions of life. What he does discover is that God is there in the midst of a life where the 'wicked' often prosper and the 'righteous' suffer, and where meaning cannot easily be made.

Job may not understand; but he can trust in the one who 'has the whole world in his hands.' In time, he recovers his hope in the pains of life. How might Job's story help us in our struggles?

### *Prayer*

Rise up, O Lord, to help us.  
In the darkness of unknowing, when your love seems absent,  
draw near to us, O God, in Christ forsaken,  
in Christ risen, our Redeemer and our Lord. Amen.

## Thursday 13 March 2008

### *Hope in the pain of life: Character building?*

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

**Romans 5:1-5**

Paul offers the Roman Christians reflections that arise from his own experience of everyday Christian discipleship. He even boasts of his sufferings – everything from shipwrecks and floggings to hunger, overwork and betrayal. Paul's response to his suffering is not simply theory, but what has proved to be real to him in the midst of trouble. This is his story: whatever has occurred has resulted in the building up of his character. Undergirding his experience has been a sense that he has not been left comfortless, Rather God's love is very tangible in his life – so he can say 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.'

What about you and me? Have our experiences of suffering built our Christian character? Or have they seemed to have the last word and diminished our lives in some way? Is there a situation we face, where we need to pray for endurance?

Paul isn't commending a passive attitude in the face of trouble, but rather the ability to persevere without despair. Can we, like Paul, speak of how our reactions and responses have been transformed in the face of 'suffering'? God longs that we will face every experience with him, in his power, and not defeated by our weakness and feelings of helplessness. The example of Jesus' suffering- remembered through Holy Week- provides us with 'a sure and certain hope' in the midst of trouble.

### *Prayer*

Meditate today on these words that helped Paul: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' (2 Cor 12:9)

## Friday 14 March 2008

### *Hope in the pain of life: What do you want me to do for you?*

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' ...Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

**Mark 10:46-52**

"Jesus stood still". Amidst the noise of the large crowd leaving Jericho, Jesus hears the cry of this beggar, and stops in his tracks. It isn't the first time that his ears are attuned to respond to human need: the woman with a haemorrhage; the Gerasene demoniac; the sick in Gennesaret; the Syrophenician woman; the blind man at Bethsaida; the boy with a spirit; and now this blind man who sits beside the road. All are stories of personal encounters where people with specific needs came or were brought by others into the presence of Jesus, in order to seek transformation or healing. They hope that an encounter with Jesus will make a difference...

Dare we seek such a personal encounter with Jesus? Dare we name our needs as Bartimaeus did? Or do we think that the invitation to Bartimaeus is no longer on offer? Maybe we have a personal story to tell? Maybe our churches or communities have stories to share of times when, in faith, needs have been named and the transforming power of Jesus experienced – the unexplainable has occurred! Have such encounters deepened our discipleship and encouraged us to 'follow him on the way' as Bartimaeus did?

### *Prayer*

We pray in faith: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me'...  
We listen for his response: 'What do you want me to do for you?'  
We name our need: 'My teacher...'

## Saturday 15 March 2008

*Hope in the pain of life: Purpose fulfilled not thwarted!*

In the film 'Bruce Almighty', Bruce Nolan claims he could run the world better and God takes up his challenge, goes on a holiday, gives Bruce all his powers and leaves him to do a better job. Many people think similarly. Some would end world hunger, some would make world peace, and others would just fix the problems in their own lives.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,  
'See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'  
And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'

**Revelation 21:1, 3-5**

The promise behind 'no more death and grief and pain' comes with a radical renewal of the whole created order, and God's immediate and total presence on earth. This renewal comes from God – creation hasn't the capacity to achieve this for itself. Like Bruce Nolan, we perhaps wish that we could sort it all out better. We even doubt that there can be another reality than the one we currently inhabit.

The vision in the book of Revelation points to the future fulfilment of God's good purposes for his creation, and as such it is full of hope, promise and future transformation. We live with painful realities that will pass. Until then may faithful prayer and worship renew our vision. Pray for God's kingdom to come, and will to be done, on earth as in heaven...

*Prayer*

God, our refuge and strength,  
bring near the day when wars shall cease and poverty and pain shall end,  
that earth may know the peace and richness of heaven  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Sunday 16 March 2008

*Palm Sunday*

*Transforming Lives – the reward?*

You sometimes hear people say that if only the Church did enough good in the world, people would be so impressed that they would come to faith. Is this true? How do you hope people will respond if you help them? And how do they actually respond? Is it how you'd hoped? Read on to see how people responded to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44).

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.'

**John 11:45-50**

Mary, Lazarus and their family clearly appreciated Jesus' love and care for them, but in the wider context this miracle resulted in jealousy. The authorities were worried that Jesus would become more popular than them, and they would lose their position. Can you think of a time when your attempts to help others have resulted in misunderstanding? Or does the worry of what people might think put you off getting involved?

As we move into Holy Week, we have a picture of Jesus, who knows he's causing controversy by doing his Father's will, simply carrying on with what he knows to be right. And in the providence of God, he will 'die for the people', as Caiaphas predicted, but this will transform many more lives than anyone might have imagined at the time.

*Prayer*

Father, please show me the good I might miss  
by worrying about what others think. Amen.

## Monday 17 March 2008

### *Transforming Lives – by loving action*

How do you repay someone who's raised your brother from the dead? And how do you comfort someone who's in such danger from doing it? I doubt many of us will have quite this problem, but we often wonder what we can say to help people in distress. Perhaps words aren't always needed?

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

**John 12:1-8**

As with Jesus raising Lazarus, so Mary's actions were also misinterpreted. But not by Jesus – he accepted the extravagant comfort she offered. It wasn't an action with practical use, simply an unspoken expression of love. Jesus knew the danger he faced – try to imagine how it might have felt to be anointed by Mary, and to have smelled the perfume filling the house. Can you think of any events in your life where an unspoken gesture has meant more than words? What effect did it have on you? Who do you know who faces distress now? Is there any way you can express your love for them?

### *Mary Sumner's Personal Prayer*

All this day, O Lord,  
let me touch as many lives as possible for thee;  
and every life I touch, do thou by thy spirit quicken,  
whether through the word I speak,  
the prayer I breathe, or the life I live. Amen.

## Tuesday 18 March 2008

### *Transforming Lives – with popular opinion?*

There have occasionally been times in history when the church has had mass appeal. Is that something you pray for nowadays? What might happen if that prayer were answered? Jesus attracted the crowds in this incident – do you think they help or hinder his mission?

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!'

So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'

**John 12:12-13, 17-19**

The crowds seem to know exactly who Jesus is – and yet their public acclamation, good as it sounds, causes problems. It sounds wonderful – but it leads to trouble with the authorities, as the Pharisees become jealous.

We sometimes think it's hard to do the right thing when we face opposition – but how do we cope when things go well? It's possible to become too dependent on people's affirmation. I'm sure Jesus welcomed the praise when it came, but in and through it all he has his eyes set on his Father's will. By contrast, the Pharisees are beginning to respond out of jealousy – if it's hard to do the right thing when we receive praise, how much harder when the acclaim goes to someone else?

### *Prayer*

Father, please help me to rejoice when things go well,  
for myself or for others,  
and to be true to you, whatever others say. Amen.

## Wednesday 19 March 2008

### *Transforming Lives – the strategy*

The popular acclaim for Jesus continues – even foreigners in Jerusalem have now heard of him. Watch how Jesus responds to fame – he doesn't let it go to his head, but sets his sights firmly on his Father's plan.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

**John 12:20-26**

One of my early memories is of getting my hand stuck in a humbug tin, because I wouldn't let go of the sweet. Of course, unless I let go neither my hand nor the sweet would come out of the tin. Sometimes we have to be prepared to risk giving up things that are precious to us, in order to live for God – but if we do he promises greater gain. As we live like this, we follow Jesus, who gave up life itself for our life. It's amazing he thought we might be worth so much.

Ask God whether there are things you need to give up – it might be something in your personal life, or it might be facets of church life which need to change for the greater good. Jesus doesn't say it's easy to live like this – he knew only too well how much it hurts – but he does say that sacrificial life brings much fruit. Do we dare to believe this might be true?

### *Prayer*

Father, show me what it means to follow Jesus,  
and help me to count the cost,  
knowing that the reward is always infinitely greater. Amen.

## Thursday 20 March 2008

### *Maundy Thursday*

### *Transforming Lives – with unconditional love*

As you read this excerpt, try to imagine how Jesus might have felt about Judas, or how you might feel in a similar situation.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

**John 13:1-5**

Think of Jesus, going round the room, washing the feet of his closest friends, as an act of practical love. Then he gets to Judas... and washes his feet. I'm not sure I could do that – I would have been thinking that if he was planning to treat me badly... well, I might think I was being 'Christian' if I didn't actively retaliate, and feel smug about it, but would I do something good for him? If we love those who try to do us evil, they may think again, and we will have transformed their life by our love. But they may be like Judas, and persist in their evil; if so, by loving them we will have kept our lives free from hate and bitterness, and have transformed our own lives.

Is there anyone who wishes you harm? Take time today to pray for them. It might help to imagine them as part of that group of disciples, and as Jesus comes to them, he would wash their feet, just as he washes yours. What would it mean in practice for you to do likewise?

### *Prayer*

Lord Jesus, help me to see others as you do, and to love them as you do, even when they wish me harm. Amen.

## Friday 21 March 2008

*Good Friday*

### *Transforming Lives – for good?*

I hope you often think about the way Jesus transforms your life – but what effect did his life and death have on the life of his mother? As you read this passage, think of her standing there at the foot of the cross, watching it all. How might you have felt, had it been you standing there? This was clearly a life-changing event for Mary – but was it a change for the better?

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

**John 19:25b-30**

We know that on the Day of Pentecost Mary was one of those in the Upper Room when the Spirit came in power, and was part of the on-going work of transformation. But these events carried an enormous cost for her.

When change comes to our lives, we need to take into account how it will affect those closest to us, but also to remember that God loves them as much as he loves us, and longs to bring good into their lives too – they shouldn't be an excuse for resisting God. Nor should we try to influence others to resist God's love in their lives, because of the cost to us. Jesus, above all people, knows how costly it is to transform lives – but he believes it is worth the cost.

### *Prayer*

See from his head, his hands, his feet,  
sorrow and love flow mingling down;  
did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Transforming Lives – 49

## Saturday 22 March 2008

*Easter Eve*

### *Transforming Lives – into open discipleship*

After the crucifixion, you would expect Jesus' followers to keep a low profile. Why would Joseph choose this moment to make his allegiance public? What might have been the consequences for him?

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

**John 19:38-43**

Are there times when you are tempted to keep quiet about your faith? What might be the consequences of being more open about it? And what might be the cost to you? It's ironic that Christians sometimes find it so difficult to talk about something so precious, especially as any of us who have faith in Jesus only have that faith because someone else was prepared to tell us.

We have the opportunity for Jesus to transform our lives with his love – and if we can pass that on, others could have the same wonderful privilege. Joseph came out into the open about his faith out of love for Jesus, and it looks as if his action encouraged Nicodemus as well. If we truly love Jesus, we will be prepared to do the same.

### *Prayer*

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life my all.

Transforming Lives – 50

**Sunday 23 March 2008**

*Easter Day*

*Transformed Lives*

But Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb... she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

**John 20:11a, 14-18**

How are lives transformed? The disciplines of prayer, worship, study and service are vital – but they are nothing without the encounter with the risen Lord. Like Mary, we cannot make that happen, but we can hang around in places where he might be, and be ready to respond when we recognise his presence. In that presence, all is transformed – she has no problems telling others of her experience, 'I have seen the Lord'.

As you read this, are you more like Mary weeping at the beginning of the reading, or the joyful Mary at the end? Be honest with God (and yourself), and be ready for whatever he wants to give, whenever he wants to give it. He loves you, and longs to transform your life too.

*Prayer*

Almighty Father,  
who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples  
with the sight of the risen Lord:  
give us such knowledge of his presence with us,  
that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life  
and serve you continually in righteousness and truth. Amen.