To my parents

Thanks to Peter LeVasseur for his magnificent art work, to Linda LeVasseur for her guidance and support, and to Nancy for all her hard work.

MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

Thoughts from a newspaper

Foreword

In the 1960's the confident claim was made that "God is dead"! The growing number of secularists at that time rejoiced that an annoying irritant had been dealt with. Subsequent years have proved how wrong they were.

The Christian faith, far from dying, is very much alive and even if the Church is under pressure it is far from dormant. Far from ignoring faith, secularists can't leave it alone; they worry at it constantly like an irritating spot.

The trouble is that so often their criticisms of Christianity are based on a misrepresentation of the Church's teachings, which they then denounce, leading both themselves and others astray.

In these short essays which first appeared in the Guernsey Press, Patricia Voute sets out a thoughtful account of faith as she has struggled to make it her own amid the conflicting pressures of life today. Many found them helpful then and have asked that they be reprinted.

All of us face the same pressures and try to make sense of things. These essays may help readers to unblock the points at which we so often get stuck, enabling them to explore further the reality of faith for their lives, since they deal with the great themes of life - love, death, relationships, generosity, truthfulness.

The secularist and the faithful will find food for thought here which can only enhance their lives.

The Very Reverend Canon Marc Trickey
Former Dean of Guernsey

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Introduction

Why do we believe in God, and if we do believe in him, how should we believe? Why can life seem hard when God is meant to be on our side and why is faith so fragile?

These are some of the questions I tried to answer when I wrote my monthly column for the Guernsey Press. In writing it, I was speaking as much to my readers as to myself, trying to find a way through the problems that bothered me.

Since ending the column, I've been surprised by how many people remember it, albeit ten years ago. Some have asked me to begin the column again, others have commented on my 'philosophical' approach to faith. In gratitude, I've taken a number of these articles and reproduce them here.

There's no reason why I have chosen one article over another, except for having lost a number of them! Certainly, they don't represent a collection of my 'favourites', and the order in which they appear, is not the order in which they were written.

In many ways, the column mapped my spiritual growth and though I'm in a different place now to where I was then, I have stayed faithful to what was printed in the Press at the time (with a little tidying up here and there).

One of the themes that run throughout these articles is the call to community. For this reason, all profits from the book will go to the building of new Cobo Community Hall. Why Cobo? Because my family lived there for many years, and in many ways St Matthews is the 'family' church with members buried and married there, and myself christened there too.

On being a Christian

What is Christianity?

The other day an acquaintance asked me to explain Christianity. I did the best I could, but soon realised the task was more difficult than I'd thought. Ever since, I've been trying to think of a better way to answer the question. Perhaps this is what I should have said.

Christianity isn't a moral system, although it has much to do with morality. If it were, we would expect Christians to be more virtuous than they are. Further more, we wouldn't expect to find an ethical code amongst atheists, since Christians claim ownership of the Truth. Yet we do.

Nor is Christianity an anaesthetic given to dull our social angst, although it's concerned with the human condition. If it were we would expect to find Christians abounding with joy. But we don't. In fact they struggle as much as anyone else.

So what is it?

The stock answer is 'a relationship', and though this might seem crass, it's insightful. It explains why Christianity is dynamic, confusing, and deeply frustrating to many. It also explains why Christians can be both admired and loathed. They can achieve amazing things yet remain as fallible as the next man.

This is because relationships are fluid. They're frail and disappointing, and so wonderful we can't live without them.

Christians are committed to relationships. Human beings are social creatures and the Trinitarian God is a community within itself. Jesus, the God-Man, isn't an idea or some vain hope, but a living, vibrant individual. The air a Christian breathes vibrates with his presence. This God, which is the source of all existence, isn't just a force but a conscience, a 'mind' and a personality. He thinks, feels and communicates. He 'is' and never cannot 'be'. From him all else proceeds.

Christians don't sign up to a moral code so they can know this God, nor do they acquire an eternal prescription of a 'make me happy' drug. Instead, they meet a 'person' and fall in love. Slowly they get to know this person and overtime they begin to reflect his character: his goodness and his kindness. The relationship isn't always easy - there are moments of doubt

and disappointment - but the Christian usually returns, a little wiser and a little less self-centred.

When all else is stripped away, this is Christianity. It's because of love that a Christian lives. Love of God, love of the world and love of themselves.

Owing to this, Christians often have a deep understanding of the human condition. Our sense of incompleteness defines what we are and what we do. We live our lives searching for the one thing that will make us whole. It's a noble search full of hope, but the incompleteness never leaves us. Yet it's in this deepest most secret part of us that God meets us. If a person is willing to take up his invitation to embrace the human condition - to know it and feel the pain of it – they will have a relationship whose depths can be explored into eternity. Like an ocean, whose surface is battered by storms, they will struggle valiantly, knowing that in the depths there is calm. For in the depths there is God.

Christianity, then, is not a religion as such, if by religion we mean laws to be followed and beliefs to be held (although these are necessary parts of the living tradition). It's mankind speaking to God. It's God speaking to mankind. It's Christ taking hold of a person in the centre of their life, in the here and now, in the real world of pain and hurt, joy and wonderment, and calling them to drink the dregs of the cup of life so that they might be crucified to that life and be resurrected to something new. That is Christianity.

What is evangelism?

The church calls our generation the microwave generation. But our church is a microwave church. It wants conversions quick and fast. It measures success by how many heads it can count. An Alpha course is only successful if at the end of it 'souls have been won for Christ'. Some Christians march about waving banners. They spout the name of Jesus at every

unsuspecting fool. They rally together and plan their next soul-saving venture.

I'm not saying that any of this is wrong, and I'm certainly not damning the Alpha course. I hold it in high regard. I'm just saying, "There are other ways".

The basic problem is theological. If you think heaven is reserved for Christians alone, then you're going to convert as many people as possible, as fast as possible. You're going to bother every one you know. The absolute certainty that accompanies such a belief and the special form of compassion that results from it, are powerful tools for evangelism and they've been successful over the generations.

But such people shouldn't forget that God counts individuals, not statistics. Knowing him is a lifetime's walk; it isn't a bungee-jump. Of course he wants to draw the whole world in, but the slow, steady discipleship of many a Christian is as valuable to him as the great conversion stories.

I don't believe Heaven is reserved for Christians alone but for any one who seeks after God. Such inclusive theology doesn't deny the uniqueness of Jesus; it just accepts there are many people who haven't accepted the Christian faith but who have lived a Christ-life and developed a Christ-nature.

This isn't to say that religion is purely ethical. It's to argue that a person needs a certain attitude to draw close to God, a way of being and a way of acting; to love truth, to seek peace, to forgive, to practice compassion and to learn self-sacrifice. This is the heart of the Father as depicted in Christ.

Christ then, is the way to the Father because he is the Father. This is what the Trinity teaches. When I look at Christ I look at the Father, and when I look at the Father, I look at Christ.

A Muslim who worships the Father in spirit and in truth is, by definition, also worshipping the Son even if he doesn't realise it. On death he will meet Christ and - in him and through him - see the Father. This man will enter heaven. Christ is the doorway because God is the doorway.

Evangelism, then, isn't so much a question of convincing people to accept the Christian faith as to encourage them to

know God. The Father can be known emotionally and spiritually, in different ways. His fullest revelation might be in Jesus, but he has been revealing himself from the beginning.

I might never see a person change the course of their life because of my prayers, but God values the nights I sat up talking to a friend on the telephone or the evenings I put aside to help them through a crisis. He cares as much for the sandwich I bought the beggar in the rain as the speaker on the podium, calling people forward to commit their lives to Christ.

Evangelism is as much about drawing in the crowds as drawing along side other people.

What is faith?

Faith is a strange concept. We know what it means but have little idea how it works.

This confusion has a lot to do with language. People speak of faith as if it were an object. This isn't surprising since faith is a noun not a verb. We say. "I have faith" in much the same way as we say "I have a car" or "I have a house." Grammar bewitches us.

From a Christian perspective, this encourages us to think of our souls as vessels into which God pours faith; we either have sufficient for ours needs or not enough. As a result, when our stocks are low we sit back and wait for God to top us up again.

But the concept 'faith' functions more like a verb than a noun. It's something we do, rather than an object we possess. When we 'faith' we're doing a number of things not least consenting to the doctrines of the church and seeking to know God as he is in himself.

Faith, then, does not come from other people having faith for us (as many claim), nor is it something that God hands out as and when he pleases. This makes us spectators rather than participators in the religious life. Instead, faith comes from knowing God. When we first consent to believe the gospel, God doesn't give us faith; rather he reveals himself to us. This

is his act of Grace. The way we think, and the actions we perform as a result of this encounter is the faith we seek.

This makes being faithful a relatively simple thing to do. We don't have to fear that God is withholding it for some bizarre reason of his own, nor do we have to go begging our friends to get as much of the stuff as they can so we can borrow a bit when the going gets tough. We don't even have to apologise for being a poor Christian. All we have to do is seek God's face.

But seeking God's face is difficult. He's hidden, and the 'world' impinges on us. His promises take time and we find it hard to believe he'll fulfil them. We can't find him in the violence of our world and we can't understand why he tarries with his justice. We doubt, and as a result we act without faith. This is nothing to be ashamed of, as some would have us believe. It's the result of the epistemic distance that rests between the Divine and us. It's part of the human condition.

To doubt God and to doubt his existence isn't a sin. The world is religiously ambiguous. The atheist and the religious believer stand on level ground when it comes to evidence for the existence of God. To faith, then, is to take a jump off the cliff's edge. It's an act of intellectual suicide. You do it with passion and commitment. And once you've done it, you wait.

This is the great lesson of the mystics: to sit in silence, waiting. We begin to know God through the fog that separates us, and the more we come to know him the more we learn to trust him. In the end, it's trust that motivates our faith. It's not our possession so much as our life.

Why do we lose faith?

Have you noticed how fascinated Christians are with conversion? I was told a story the other day of a man in hospital who was healed after reciting the first prayer of his life. Experiences such as these are bizarre and exciting, and they remind us that God exists.

But over the years I've come to wonder about it all. Despite having had a conversion experience myself, I worry that we never speak about those who lose their faith. Their stories are just as real and important.

Losing faith is part of the human experience. It's happening all the time. Some lose faith in others and some in themselves, while some lose faith in God. These experiences are pertinent reminders that the world isn't easy to understand and we can get confused in our assessment of things. When it comes to religion, the world is "religiously ambiguous". Some see God in it; others don't.

Last Sunday I heard Desmond Tutu preach at Southwark Cathedral in London. It was a wonderful experience but one that was meaningless to the person who doesn't believe any more. Their world-view doesn't cohere with Tutu's vision of compassion and love, and there's little one can do about it. It just isn't the way they see things any more.

Faith is composed of both experience and interpretation. It's a lens through which we see the world and the means by which we learn to understand it. A person who converts acquires a new pair of 'spectacles', and the person who loses faith does the same. Christians talk of the Prodigal Son, but for those who have lost sight of God, the parable is reversed. They're the ones who wait for his return, and he never does.

My point is simple: if owing to some personal tragedy the lens through which a person sees the world shifts or is lost, we shouldn't condemn them but try to understand. Madeleine McCann's father has admitted that the death of his daughter would severely test his faith. Why? Because God is meant to answer our prayers. When God doesn't, what then of God?

The uncomfortable truth is that there's no evidence for or against God that is in anyway conclusive. To believe in God is to see the world in a certain way. It might be a beautiful way, but it isn't the only way.

The philosopher Basil Mitchell tells a parable about a spy dropped into occupied France during the War. He meets a stranger who claims to be the head of the resistance and who asks him to put his trust in him. Sometimes the spy sees the

stranger working for the resistance, sometimes he sees him working against it. Some in the resistance distrust the stranger, but the spy continues to believe in him because he has invested his life in that belief. He isn't going to give it up easily. But one day, should the evidence against the stranger reach crisis point, then he will change the way he sees things.

That crisis point is different for each and every one of us, but it exists. No one is immune from disbelief and we would be wise to remember it.

What is prayer?

Prayer is natural to human beings. Even the atheist has been known to try it now and then, which is why the sceptics have done experiments to determine whether it works. One such experiment was televised on BBC2 a few years ago, but I didn't need to watch it to know the results would be inconclusive. The effects of prayer are notoriously difficult to measure because there are too many variables in any study to affirm that X happened because of Y.

Prayer is natural because hope is natural. In the Greek myths, Prometheus created a box in which all the ills that could afflict mankind were sealed. Being wise, however, he ensured that Hope was encased there too so that when Pandora opened the box, Man wouldn't be destroyed. To this day we fight disease and calamity in the hope that they can be conquered.

But even if prayer is about hope – the hope that things might be better - there are many forms of prayer and it's to our detriment that we limit it to requests alone. Of course, there's nothing wrong with asking God for things. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus asked for 'daily bread'. But to restrict prayer to a shopping list is to miss the point.

Such prayers are precarious. What of the little girl who prays for her mother's life, or the father who prays for rain to feed his children? Life is mysterious. It's also cruel. Prayer isn't so much about resolving the world, as finding peace

within it; it's not so much about changing the mind of God, as learning to trust him.

Prayer is a profound activity. It's the means by which we come to know God. In this sense prayer is more like a conversation than a slot machine. Yet this isn't an adequate a definition either. Many Christians are good at talking to God. You only have to attend a prayer meeting to hear the profusion of words that are offered up to heaven. But you can talk and talk and never get to know the person you're talking to.

Prayer is a two-way conversation. We learn to relate intimately with God as we listen to him. Yet this explanation is also deficient because God doesn't talk as we talk. You can wait in silence for an hour and hear nothing in return. This doesn't deny the peace we can find in prayer, but it does question the value of simplistic definitions.

Ultimately, prayer is the way into another dimension. It's the doorway through which we journey. It's equivalent to travelling underwater. On opening the submarine hatch, you find yourself in the midst of the sea. When we pray, we open the door of this reality and enter into another. It's quantifiably different to our own and our rules don't function there. When we truly pray we find ourselves changed by the experience, not because we get what we want, but because we've encountered something beyond us. This is the purpose and benefit of prayer: to encounter Truth and to be changed by it.

If prayer is like opening the hatch of a submarine then we have to pass through a number of chambers before we're ready to swim out into the sea. Quiet preparation is essential to centre our minds on what we're doing. Praise and gratitude help us to recall the nature of God. We might want to talk, we might want to be quiet, but in the end we must aim for the deep silence of meditation if we wish to encounter him. When Archbishop Ramsey was asked how long he prayed each day, he answered: one minute. What he meant, of course, was that only at the end of his prayer time, when he had prepared himself for silence, did he find himself in God.

Living as a Christian

Does life have meaning?

It's been one of those months. Time and again I've been asked to explain the apparent meaninglessness of life and I've made a poor job of it. Not that I'm against the question. The universe impinges itself upon us, huge and uncompromising, and to wonder at our place within it is to take the first step towards self-discovery. We should ponder the value of existence, the meaning of life, the purpose of our here-and-now. It's the thing that makes us human.

But the meaninglessness of life is scary– to have glimpsed it is to have had a vision of hell. It's the awful realisation that nothing matters. As the great teacher said in Ecclesiastes: "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind…what does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labours? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest…."

No wonder Ecclesiastes is in the centre pages of the Bible. The sense of hopelessness is very real and to be dreaded. But we can't avoid it and we shouldn't let it to go unchallenged.

It seems to me that part of the meaning of life is found in the human search for truth. We fall into despair when we can't find it. We seem to be emotionally and psychologically unable to cope with nothingness. If this were not so, we'd be content to stare into the night sky and accept our status as recycled molecules of former things. We'd rest in the knowledge that nothing determines our existence.

Yet we scream and fight against this vision of life.

Our desire to know the meaning of existence is our need to know whether there's a purpose to our lives.

Owing to our intelligence as a species and our developed self-awareness, it seems reasonable to assume that we can know the consequence of our lives. But since that can only be assessed after death, we must live after death to know it. Yet how can the value of our lives be assessed in the next world, if we can take nothing into it – nothing, that is, save ourselves? Surely it can only be assessed in relation to who we are.

This is the truth and the fulcrum of all self-awareness, that the character and personality that evolves in our bodies, is the meaning of our lives. It is this 'I' that will stand before God and give account. It is this 'I' that will look upon the Divine face and either recognise Love or reject.

The meaning of life then is this: that you, I, and every other human being living should become the best person we can. We have the choice to be whatever we wish, but the individual we grow into will be the eternal statement of our value and our purpose. Surely then it's incumbent on us to become a person of honesty, justice and compassion, to love and be loved, to walk the straight road and not bequeath eternity our selfishness and our lies, our foolish lusts and shameful pettiness. As the great teacher of Ecclesiastes writes at the close of his book, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

Happiness

Happiness. If there is something we all strive to achieve, this is it. For some people, it's the goal of life, for others the indication that life is good, but for all of us it's the hope of happiness that keeps us going.

Yet it's notoriously difficult to define happiness. Is it pleasure? Wealth? Fame? Love? And how much of these do we need to acquire happiness? According to research in one British university, happiness can be measured through money, the dividing line being around £1 million!

Aristotle didn't believe that happiness laid in wealth or in pleasure. Nor did he think it was a feeling; feelings come and go, but we seek a happiness that lasts. That's why it's best understood as an activity, something we do. It's found in our search for truth and our desire to be virtuous. Even when we're in pain or suffering, we can know happiness through the knowledge that what we do is right.

In the 1940's Teilhard de Chardin wrote a book on the topic. He said, "not only is it better to be then not to be, but … it is also possible to attain a fuller measure of being." In this sense he agreed with Aristotle. Happiness is found in activity, and for De Chardin this activity is nothing less then the search for self-fulfilment. But what is valuable self-fulfilment? Do we permit the sadist to continue being sadistic because this fulfils his sense of self? Or do we dare argue that some paths are better than others?

Teilhard de Chardin used the science of evolution to support the latter. He believed a study of the universe showed that there were three possible attitudes towards happiness, and only one was valuable: the striving to become greater. Evolution is endlessly moving towards the emergence of more complex species with more developed consciousness. In keeping with this, we must move towards a more developed sense of who we are.

But how can we achieve this? Well, first we must develop ourselves. Second, we must avoid becoming self-obsessed and drawing into ourselves. We must join in with the rest of humanity because, like atoms in a large molecule, we are being woven together, needing each other so that we might function. Thirdly, we must have a vision of something 'Other', a cosmic presence in the Universe.

For me, these visions of happiness are inspiring. It's not because Aristotle and de Chardin deny pleasure, or reject the joy that comes from it; they merely argue that this isn't happiness. If it were, we would limit our vision of life to the physical alone, and in search of physical pleasure we would grow ever more selfish. Others become the means by which we acquire happiness rather than ourselves being the vehicles of it. And selfishness, as we know is the one attitude that separates each man from his neighbour. Its legacy is cosmic unhappiness!

So how should you and I live our lives? According to Teilhard de Chardin, we must never follow the path of least resistance. In any action, we should choose the one that will develop us the most, in our work, in our private lives and in

our own search for who we truly are. It's the aspiration to be the best person we can be.

At the same time, we must strive against selfishness. Happiness isn't found in self-absorption or in dominance of others. It isn't found in the subtle desire to manipulate people's affection so they love us for who we appear to be, rather than who we are. Instead it's found in the difficult road of giving and sharing, of being open and honest, in rejecting the masks that separate us from each other. It's recognising that happiness isn't something we receive from others, but something that is born in us as we move out towards others.

Finally, we must believe there is a cosmic force that unites all things together. Just as we begin to discover who we really are, it draws us away from the knowledge of self towards the knowledge of others so that we transfer our interest in ourselves to an interest in the world in which we live. In that way, according to Teilhard de Chardin, we will be "happy – completely happy."

Courage:

If Aristotle and de Chardin are right that happiness isn't found in pleasure but in virtue, then we're up against the collective wisdom of our popular culture. Quite simply, virtue isn't unfashionable. The Cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, courage and justice) and the Theological virtues (love, hope and faith) threaten our freedom and individuality; they challenge our desire to pursue pleasure with total abandon. They're psychological prisons and physical chains. Few of us welcome them. And those of us that do would rather be judged by our outer actions than our inner attitudes.

Yet, there's little value in an act of kindness performed by a person filled with hatred. Your enemy's smile becomes insidious when there's little truth behind it. For this reason perhaps, we should be cautious of how we judge people. The socialite performing apparent acts of generosity mightn't be as

right in their soul as the person we criticise for being withdrawn. Wisdom calls us to be wary. Before obvious injustice and evil we must speak out, but only God knows the heart of a man.

Of all the virtues, I find courage the most alluring. I see so little of it and I struggle so hard to acquire it. It's the one needed to fulfil all the others. It takes courage to be prudent, courage to be temperate, courage to speak out in the name of justice. Without courage, the alcoholic wouldn't give up his habit, and without courage the bully's victim wouldn't endure.

Courage is necessary for human life. It's the conquest of fear. Fear is part of our daily life and we experience it in many subtle forms. Yet all manifestations of fear are rooted in one single human terror: the fear of death: death of our reputation, our friendships, our jobs, our self-respect, our security, our beliefs, our loves and our hates.

But to be brave, we must face death and conquer it. For this reason, cowardice is something to be shunned. It robs us of our humanity because it drags us down, rather than up; it hinders our moral and spiritual development and leads us away from the good. Its legacy is a feeble mind and a feeble will.

Courage then must be part of our daily living. In every respect we're at war. We fight our inner battles of doubt and inferiority, and our outer wars of injustice and labour. Even the most mundane existence is an adventure because we're called to struggle through it in pursuit of what is right.

Courage however isn't reckless daring. The person who runs out to battle his enemy isn't necessarily courageous. We might prefer the smashing attack of a cavalry charge, but it's more difficult to stand before an enemy of superior strength and forebear. It takes courage to cling to resistance in the face of an enemy that beats you day after day, year after year.

On one level this type of courage can appear weak and defeatist. But when all you can do is hold on, than courage becomes a sustaining force, the dogged determination not to relinquish the good. It doesn't ease when the adrenaline eases. It doesn't cease when the battle charge is over. The force of the bully doesn't compare to the victim who refuses to be

bullied. Nor does the threatening power of the pack compare to the solitary person who strives against it even if at every turn he appears to be beaten. The fighter who goes down but refuses to stay down is never inferior to the conqueror.

We admire courage, and when we witness it we applaud it. The pack might despise the victim they can't destroy, but the steely power of the courageous affects everyone in the end.

Yet courage isn't necessarily a glorious act. There is sorrow in it, and pain. Still, it harbours a joy of sorts. Such is the mystery of the virtues. To have battled and to have won, to have endured fear until the fear is gone and only humility remains: this is joy.

It was Thomas Moore who ascended the scaffold laughing, not his executioner. It was Judas who despaired, not Christ.

For the Christian, the practice of courage is the joy of following a Master who was neither a coward nor a fool. He was supremely brave. He jousted the armies of injustice and fear. And his death was a victory.

Angst

Life is full of angst, or so the existentialists tell us. Restless and dissatisfied, we spend our time searching for that one love or that one job which will make us whole.

Even more than this, we live in fear of death. After a lifetime of hopes and dreams, the grave wipes us away and in doing so defines us as superfluous. This is intolerable. We want to be important and full of value.

But in the end we die.

The truth is that we live our lives frustrated and unknown. Our town is too small, our homes too mundane and our job hides the greatness we know rests inside us. Sometimes we feel we're suffocating under the insignificance that surrounds us, and when that restless ache for greatness grips us we become full of angst - if only we weren't married to this

person, if only we weren't in that job, if only we were living somewhere else.

If only.

It's true that we're great and our lives are small. The office-boy dreams of the poem he'll write in the depths of the night, and awakes to the alarm clock that calls him to work. The mother laments the great actress she could have been, and the married woman wonders if there's anyone who truly understands her.

This longing is real and very deep. It's the definition of humanity. As Ronald Rolheiser wrote, we're martyrs to our own obscurity. Too often we feel we've died before we've really lived. Great literature has come from such struggles, and we devour the tragedies of those who've tried to define themselves. We love heroes, and we cry over their failures because in some sense they're our own silent misfortunes.

To many this dis-ease is an evil to be eradicated. It must be conquered if we're ever to find peace. The teaching of the Buddha focused on human desire, the source of all suffering. If we could recognise the impermanence of things, he said, we be able to eradicate the thirst for life and find tranquillity.

And he's right. An unhealthy desire to express our uniqueness leads to suffering. We become competitive, bitter, hopelessly restless and often angry.

But he was wrong to say life is an illusion and everything is impermanent. We aren't called to die to a delusion, but live to a truth. Although Christianity teaches martyrdom especially the martyrdom of obscurity (to quote Rolheiser), it confirms our uniqueness. We're restless *because* we're great. We're dissatisfied *because* our lives are too small and this world is unfulfilling. That's a fact of life and we're called to embrace it. Peace is found not in eradicating suffering, but in accepting it.

If we could accept this truth, if we could realise that what we suffer isn't a disease but the birth pangs of hope than we'd accept our ordinary lives and live them. We'd be assured that in the world of light beyond death we'd be as great as we ever hoped and as fulfilled as we ever dreamed.

Trust

Trust is essential to communal living and without it our societies fall apart. If we can't trust a friend to be honest, there will come a point when we'll question that friendship. Trust and honesty are mutually dependent.

When it comes to politics we might not consider the Government our 'friend' but we exist in relationship with it and the need for trust and honesty remain. A good friend is an honest friend, and a good government is an honest government. The same goes for reliability: a good government is reliable. It's also caring, dependable, faithful and credible.

Every day life, however, isn't theory. I may preach on the psychology and ethics of friendship while realising that few people meet the ideal. But just because I've known friends who have failed me doesn't mean I should give up on the concept. To do so would be foolish. In the end I'm a human being; I need friendship.

The same, of course, goes for Government. I might despair at their failure to live up to their ideals, but because this Government or that Government disappoints doesn't mean I must relinquish all hope and advocate anarchism, or worse yet, refuse to involve myself in any form of political activity.

In a strange way, religion isn't much different. As a religious believer I choose to trust in God. That trust is linked to honesty: I believe God to be honest, true and good, even though I've witnessed things that have led me to doubt this.

I continue to trust in God despite evidence that might point to the contrary because I'm committed to that relationship. I'm committed to a particular way of interpreting the world. The same goes for friendship and democratic Government. Of course, I may change my mind. I've done so before when I've discovered my trust to be wrongly placed, or my understanding of the world to be confused.

My point, however, is this: our emotional and psychological paradigms shift over time, and as a result our relationships change. They're altered and modified as the trust that upholds them increases or decreases.

This is an aspect of religious faith that's frequently ignored. At the heart of it is freedom. As we learn to trust God more, so we learn to live in greater freedom; we begin to relate to God with more intimacy and less fear. We learn to let go.

This is mirrored in our human relationships. The more I trust my friends, the more I allow them to be themselves: I free them from the fear that they might hurt me. In that sense I let them go.

In the same way, the more I trust God, the more freedom I give him to be 'himself'. I don't need to control God. I don't need to force him to fit my particular interpretation of faith. He's incomprehensible, and I permit him to be so.

For many this results in a greater liberalism. God is the God of all men. He has revealed himself over the centuries to different cultures and different peoples. This doesn't deny the uniqueness of his manifestation in Christ, but it does deny the exclusivity of that manifestation. The Buddha knew God, Muhammad knew God, Guru Nanak knew God. The desperate man on the cliff top in search of peace knows God.

Liberal Christians come under fierce attack from their evangelical brothers. But the Liberal trusts God as much as the Fundamentalist. It's just that he trusts in different way. Of course, the Liberal might be wrong, just as the Evangelical might be wrong. In the end, God is a mystery. But in Christ we see enough of God's grace to know he won't condemn us for being wrong. He'll only condemn us for not loving while we were wrong.

Hatred

It's easy to hate. It's easy to blame others for the problems we face and to believe ourselves the victims of a cruel world. But it's always the coward that takes the road of hatred and revenge. The courageous seldom do. They know that suffering comes from somewhere and is going somewhere, and

our anger in the face of it is like a tidal wave surging forward, wrecking havoc as it crashes down.

Everywhere we're witnessing the effects of hatred in the face of injustice, and I challenge anyone to show me the good that has come from it. Israel and Palestine? The Israelis live in fear, the Palestine in poverty and repression. Where has the killing taken them? Deeper into the pit of hatred from which there seems to be no return. What of Iraq? What of Somalia? I could go on.

It isn't only the far-flung nations that suffer, however. What of our own communities? They're full of petty angers born from some imagined slight, or a foolish word leading to silence between families that can span generations.

These are everyday experiences - the evening of scores and the settling of differences. It's the law of the playground. The victor may rejoice for a period, but cause and effect continues. What you sow is what you reap.

When I watched the film 'To End All Wars' on BBC2 I was inspired. Based on the true story of Captain Ernest Gordon of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, it tells of his imprisonment in a Japanese POW camp. Called to build the Railroad of Death, it explores his struggle to find freedom in the midst of despair and inhumanity.

In the same camp were Major Ian Campbell and Lieutenant Tom Ridgen. Campbell couldn't tolerate the cruelty to which he and his men were subjected. Filled with hatred, he was determined to escape. He'd stop at nothing. Rigden, on the other hand, followed a code of self-preservation that undercut the communal spirit required to survive the camp regime. Both men planned, schemed and fought. They worked to overthrow the Japanese in their own way until their plans came into conflict. Then the Campbell told on Rigden, and watched as the Japanese enacted their revenge.

The anger of both men was justifiable. But the question was this: what quality of freedom would they have achieved had they succeeded in their plans?

Inspired by a fellow POW, Ernest Gordon started to look inwards. Understanding Japanese culture (which entitled them

to despise POWs) and aware that they couldn't escape from the camp, he sought freedom in dignity.

First he set up a school; then he created a 'university'. He discussed Plato and justice. He invited a Cambridge Don to lecture on Shakespeare. Through the great thinkers and the great artists of history, he tried to draw the men out of despair into a freedom of thought and understanding that moved them beyond revenge. He called them to rise above the inhumanity of their captors by developing a humanity that was greater. The chains that enslaved them were found within. He called the men to peace and love.

Love is the greatest creative force in our universe, and in the film there were two acts of love. The first was when Dusty offered to die in the place of the Major who was to be decapitated for having killed a guard. Dusty wasn't decapitated; he was crucified.

The second was the arrival of wounded Japanese soldiers who had been bombed by the Allies. The Japanese refused them entrance to the camp, but Gordon and the Doctor used their impoverished supplies to nurse them.

What was gained by those two acts of love? Nothing quantifiable on an empirical level. But the men in the camp, including the Japanese translator and those who sympathised with the Major, witnessed the dignity of the human spirit. They witnessed the heights to which humanity can raise when it finds freedom within to love.

Respect

I admit it; I went to see David Blaine hang over London Bridge in his Perspex box. I was hypnotised by the spectacle. I could have sat for ages watching him raise his hand and nod in that mechanised fashion of his. In theory it shouldn't have been interesting, but it was in a brain-dead sort of a way. I watched; he sat. There was nothing else to it.

Was it necessary, then, to fly a toy aeroplane carrying a hamburger past him or attempt to cut his water supply? And what was the point of throwing rotten tomatoes? David Blaine's stunt might have been ridiculous, attention seeking, masochistic, but the man never offered himself as anything less. He got his money, we were entertained and in the end we had something to talk about.

A friend said it was 21st century rage. But rage is nothing new and if urban violence takes a particular form in our age, it has taken other forms in the past.

From the child in the playground to the tyrannical dictator, all of us seek excuses for our behaviour. Our age of psychotherapy can aggravate this tendency. I have friends in the business whose efforts to free people from their obsessions and fears are admirable. But we shouldn't allow this valuable work to blind us to a basic truth: we're all capable of hatred, malice, cruelty and violence.

Traditionally Christianity has spoken of sin, and in particular Original Sin to explain this tendency. But sin isn't a popular concept and even less so in a culture that is so litigious we've forgotten what it is to accept responsibility. In the end, we all dislike the idea of 'sin' because it permits no excuse and no compromise. Once the line has been crossed, the reasons for crossing it aren't as important as the crossing itself, and no amount of explanation can deny the fact.

Of course sin can only be understood if there's something to measure it against, something that it is universally applicable. The measure is the nature of God. If God is denied then the measuring line shifts back and forth according to the culture or the law of the country. But to deny God's existence isn't to eradicate his existence. I can deny the existence of quarks without in anyway affecting their reality.

Let's take Jack who cheated on his wife. I'm sure he can offer a number of reasons why he did it: she'd been getting at him, he couldn't help himself, he didn't think it would upset her, people say it adds spice to a relationship. To some extent all these reasons are true not least because he believed them to be true. Yet peel away the layers and one fundamental truth

remains, one of which Jack is probably unaware and one that he'd be unwilling to admit: he didn't respect his wife as much as he respected himself. That is sin.

If Jack had truly loved his wife, he would have struggled through temptation to ensure her happiness. If Jack had had a proper sense of love, he'd have known that adultery doesn't titillate, it only destroys. The measure of his failing is God's love. God seeks the good of all. Until we seek the good of all in everything we think and say and do, we sin.

That's why the person who threw the tomatoes at David Blaine sinned as much as the person who tried to cut his water supply. That's why you and I can't get through a day without being guilty of it. We're always pitching ourselves up against others. We criticise without justification, we judge without knowledge and we spread rumours without concern. Sin is endemic. There might be justified reasons as to why some people engage in these activities more than others but, in the end, no one's innocent, and no one's good. This is the start of wisdom. The rest is God.

Forgiveness

It's Easter and I want to write about forgiveness. But when an atheist read a draft of this article she was incensed. Initially, I was at a lost until I realised how natural her reaction was in the face of Christianity's claims and the demands it makes upon us.

None of us can live without forgiveness. We say it's a lovely idea until – as CS Lewis wrote – we have something to forgive. Then we call it unjustified, illogical, a fool's belief, just like my friend.

That is why I have little time for people who are glib about forgiveness. It isn't candy tossed at an oppressor, and it isn't a case of 'forgive and forget'. There are some things people will never forget, and to call them to do so is to trivialise their pain. Pain is real; evil is real.

Yet, Christianity calls us to forgive. Moreover, it calls us to forgive in the full face of memory. We're called to forgive when our soul is calling out for justice. We're called to struggle through the pain of forgiveness because justice – the very thing we rightfully deserve – has to be laid aside. This is why forgiveness is illogical and this is why it's hard. It crucifies the wrong person. We should be shocked by it.

Perhaps – and I say this with caution - revenge isn't necessarily wrong. The person who calls for revenge has recognised a great evil; and in the face of evil God expects us to be angry. The human call for justice is God's call for justice, and we do ourselves few favours when we deny this. But – and this is a very large 'But' – revenge is the duty of God, not humanity. Why? Because our revenge is destructive. We can't stand outside our anger. We lash out and seek to right wrongs through violence. We drag the past into the future and continue the cycle of pain.

As Yancey wrote, "The strongest argument for forgiveness is the alternative, a permanent state of unforgiveness. … and the one major flaw in the law of revenge [is that] it never settles the score."

Yet when God says, "vengeance is mine" he is promising an alternative: revenge inextricably linked with forgiveness. In some strange way forgiveness is justice, and its vengeance is more powerful than any act of violence we can conceive. At its centre is a voice calling the oppressor to start the walk of accountability. It's the reshaping of a life, and as a result, the world as well.

The Biblical picture of forgiveness, then, is costly. It creates a new opportunity for the undeserving. It opens a door and allows the oppressor to walk through it, freeing him from the past. The victim gives everything to the oppressor with no guarantee of reward. The only hope is that the cycle of hatred will end.

Is this just? According to my friend it isn't. It's madness.

That might well be the case, but Jesus believed it and lived it. As the force of human cruelty was hammering nails into his flesh he called out again and again, "Father, forgive them."

No one is good, no not one, says St Paul; we all need forgiveness and we all need to forgive. Few of us can do what Jesus did, but we should try the best we can.

Liberation

George Bernard Shaw wrote, "Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it." I think he might be right.

When the Channel Islands celebrate sixty years of liberation from Nazi occupation, it wasn't just a case of expressing our gratitude. It was to ponder the duty we hold towards the freedom we've been given.

The word 'freedom' implies choice. We're free to choose our job, our home, our lover, and our religion. We're free to choose between differing political parties and to express our thoughts without fear of arrest. We consider this type of freedom to be our right, and our grandparents fought that we might enjoy it.

But freedom comes at a price. It requires us all to be accountable: the politicians, the judiciary, the education system, the media, big business, the banks and each one of us. To be free in our society is to be responsible for the decisions we make.

The great world religions function within this framework. The Eastern faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism talk of the law of Karma, which holds a person accountable for the freedom he possesses. The monotheistic faiths talk about God. Both religious movements, however, accept that we're responsible for who we become. We're born incomplete and develop our characters through the choices we make.

However, the religions also recognise that we're enslaved to our desires. We pursue ends that favour ourselves and often damage those around us. As a result, we need liberation from ourselves, a claim that has been taken up by popular psychology, and is now part of the collective consciousness.

To be liberated is to be given freedom. But to be free is to be accountable. The Buddha may show us how to be released from the desires that assail us and cause us pain, but we remain responsible for what we do. God may promise us that through his love manifested in Jesus we can learn to move away from self-love to love of the other, but he watches and weighs our actions.

When we celebrate Europe's freedom from oppression we need to take a close look at our lives. How have we used this freedom? Have we been honest in our jobs and in our relationships? Have we swallowed our pride and apologised for the wrongs we have done? Have we humbled ourselves to admit to a weakness or a fault?

We can rail against the Nazi machine as much as we like, but in the end it was composed of individuals like you and I who at every moment of their lives made free decisions. There were those who turned a blind eye to what was going on, and those who collaborated out of fear of reprisals. There were many who believed that a politic of hate and oppression was justified.

And then there were those who like Bonheoffer chose to use his freedom to overthrow Hitler and died as a result. Or those like Maximillian Kolbe who chose to take the place of a desperate man in the starvation chamber at Auschwitz.

Thankfully, we don't have to make such decisions, but the ones we do make are no less important. That is why we need to liberate ourselves from the pride that dominates our lives and the selfishness that motivates our actions.

Sex and Greed

"Greed is the greatest evil of our time," I said.

Tim shook his head. "The lack of purity is."

The waitress de-corked a bottle of wine and for a moment I thought Tim was going to ask her opinion as well. But he didn't.

Tim is an evangelical priest. We have known each other for years and we disagree on almost everything. He holds that contemporary attitudes to sex must be challenged; I believe our desire to possess and control is more pernicious. Rampant sex is destroying lives and communities, he argues. I venture that the last commandment is more important: our desire to covert everything from money to people.

Either way, we both agree that the sexual revolution has failed us. It hasn't brought the freedom it promised, and in many ways it has stolen from the young the very thing the revolution sought to bestow: the right to choose. Few youngsters are going to admit to being a virgin these days. And if they do, they're going to ensure they know a lot about the topic to compensate. Ignorance is something you don't choose.

I remember a twelve-year-old boy saying at the end of class one day: "my parents told me to ask you why I can't have sex." I admitted the question was a valid one and tried hard to discuss the issue with him. But the only answer he was willing to consider was the danger of paedophilia. Sex was his right, he said. He wasn't concerned about pregnancies, emotional hurt or physical disease. Only the thought of abuse at the hands of an older man bothered him.

Living the social fall-out of teenage sex, the American Church developed The Silver Ring Thing. An abstinence programme, it aims to encourage teenagers to refrain from sex until marriage. Through fast, fun and high-tech presentations they call youngsters to receive the silver ring and to sign an abstinence vow. Already two and half million youngsters in the USA have joined the movement, and people such as Miss America and (formerly) Britney Spears have championed the endeavour. It has now reached the UK.

Of course, anything that reduces teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases should be supported; any attempt to encourage teenagers to stand back from sex and consider the consequences should be applauded. But I'm not convinced the Silver Ring Thing is the answer.

Research indicates that abstinence campaigns tend to delay sexual activity by about eighteen months; moreover, they don't teach youngsters to practice safe sex once they start. Calling young people to take a vow in a moment of emotional hype is not, on its own, going to change the cultural climate of our times. To stick to the vow requires a maturity most young people don't possess.

How then, do we prepare youngsters for sex while at the same time encouraging them not to participate in it until they are older?

Frankly, I have no idea. The Church is trying; the Government is trying. But no one is listening.

Why? Because abstinence isn't part of the youth's cultural or social language. This isn't their fault. Sex has become the font in which most of our communication is written. Telling them to abstain from it is like telling them to give up eating. It's preposterous, ludicrous. It's simply impossible.

What we need in our society is a cultural shift – a new revolution.

And we need the media on our side. Television, films, magazines, newspapers, radio. They direct our civilization, interplaying powerfully with other institutions by selling their vision to the public. They're the wizards of our time. Regrettably, however, they're driven by the need to make money, and sex sells.

So I return to my original point. Greed is the great destroyer. Until sex loses its commercial power, we're fighting a losing battle.

Pain

After watching the film, 'The Passion of the Christ', I realised I spent most of my life avoiding a central tenet of Christianity: if I wish to share in God's life, I must share in his suffering also. Jesus understood this, Mary understood this and so did St Paul. I suspect that most of us don't.

Everything tells us to avoid suffering at all costs: our physiology, our psyche and, of course, our culture. Bookshops are littered with self-help books and some churches teach a theology of success and self-fulfilment. Many of London's big churches openly advocate Prosperity Christianity, and vicars believe they've failed if they don't get 'bums of seats.'

Of course, there's nothing wrong with promulgating God's generosity, or helping people to seek wealth. But a balance has to be maintained. Yes, God wishes us to be self-fulfilled. No, he isn't much interested in our worldly success.

So, are we ready to be invisible nobodies in a world of celebrities if that's what God is calling us to be? Are we willing to lose everything in the pursuit of justice, even for the ungrateful?

All of us struggle with such questions and as Jane Williams says, most of us have already answered them – and the answer is No.

Even Jesus struggled with them. He was tempted in the desert to pursue personal success, and he was tempted in the Garden of Gethsemane to flee the suffering awaiting him. In both cases he struggled until he was able to place God's will before his own, realising that God sees things differently.

God cares for us and supports us, but he calls us to place our own concerns below those of the wider community. This requires humility if it's to be done with integrity. It means not caring whether we're admired by other people or have the trappings of a wealthy life to impress our friends. It means praying for the grace to accept an insignificant life and not hoping, secretly, that God will be so impressed by our faith that he'll give us the success we crave.

This is a difficult theology. I struggle with it as much as the next man, but it's at the centre of the Christ-story. Preached to the masses, it's unlikely to draw them in. But unless we preach it to Christians, we're never going to affect the world.

As long as Christians follow the same self-centred myths that infect our society, they'll have little to offer society that the mass media isn't already offering. And let's be honest, the media does a better job of it.

The challenge is to find value in the hidden things we do. It's realising that God 'promises to share His life [with us]… but it does have to be his life, not the comfortable if pointless counterfeit that we are used to substituting.' (Jane Williams).

The truth is, there are things we dislike about God and this makes it difficult for us to walk the hard path of faith. But unless we do so, we'll never be true Christians.

Adversity and religion

'Character building' is a popular mantra in our family. When the going gets tough, everyone says, "It's a good character building experience". This might be true, but it's not very comforting!

Yet it's not until you experience genuine adversity that you realise there really isn't an option. In fact, I can hear my Jewish friend saying, "and you think *that*'s character building" when I don't get the job or another rejection note comes through the door. All I can do is blush because real adversity has a very different flavour to it.

It's about loss, of course, like all human suffering, but it rushes unexpectedly into our lives and forces us to think everything anew. Then we see the truth of the proverb, 'Adversity comes with instruction in his hand**.'**

Hardship is the ruthless exposing of all we've become. It puts our character into relief and if we can't cope with it – and most of us can't - then something has to change in our lives.

Understandably religion has much to say on the matter.

In Islam, adversity comes from Allah; it's given for our admonishing and maturing. Patience, then, is a great virtue. We can weep at our misfortune, and rail against fate, but in the end we're called to persevere. As it says in the Qur'an:

> "We try you by means of danger, and hunger, and loss of worldly goods, of lives and of labour's fruits. But give glad tidings unto those who are patient in adversity … It is they

upon whom their Sustainer's blessings and grace are bestowed."

Judaism takes a similar approach. Through out the Tenakh (Old Testament) chosen individuals are called to periods of great testing: Rachel, Moses, David. The list is long. In the Talmud, the book of commentary, the Rabbis taught that 'a person is born to struggle' and that 'the reward is commensurate with the pain'. We see this in the story of Job. Considered to be one of the oldest books in the Bible, God rewards him three-times over for the anguish he's suffered. In the end, Judaism teaches that nothing worthwhile in life - not even birth itself - can be achieved without pain.

Although Christianity agrees with Judaism and Islam, it has its own perspective on the problem. Rooted in the belief that God became human and suffered, Christianity proffers a divine mystery at the heart of adversity, through which a person is called to enter into the nature of God. Somehow, we're transformed not just through faith and perseverance (although these are important) but also through a profound identification with the wounds of Christ. This theology, prevalent amongst the mystics, has gained popularity because of its strong psychological dimension.

The God of Christ is a suffering-God. What that means for the nature of God is a tough theological question. What it means for us is everything: God enters into the centre of our pain and with our consent, helps us transform it.

Despair*:*

I nearly drowned in my twenties. I was swimming off a beach in Dubai when I fell into a ditch that ran perpendicular to the shore. The waves came fast and furious. I tried to keep my head up so I could breathe but all I could think about was finding firm ground. The need to breathe was so desperate I couldn't do anything but gasp and lash out. It was my brother-in-law who saved me. My father admits he had neither the

strength nor the stamina to wrench me free. My sister and mother watched from the beach oblivious. They thought I was jumping around, having fun.

Sometimes life pounds us relentlessly and we can feel as if we're drowning. Those around us think we're fine, unaware that we've floundering. We're so consumed by the need to survive that we don't even know where to turn for help.

In circumstances such as these, wise words can help but they seldom pull us free. Positive thinking might ease a difficult situation but sometimes life is just hard and unfair. It's a relief when a friend recognises this. It removes the need to pretend. You can vent your frustration and start to think afresh.

Just as a person is never quite the same after they've survived a near-death experience, so a person's relationship with God is never the same after their faith has been tested. For some it results in the rejection of God, for others in the rejection of a specific way of thinking about God.

It's like a great wind blowing across the prairies and flattening the posts a farmer has staked out in the ground to make sense of the space about him. He wakes up in the morning to find himself alone in a wilderness. He tries to dig the stakes back into their old holes, but they won't stay. He looks at the flat empty land and the sky overhead, and wonders how he's ever going to live in such barrenness.

This is when we experience the absence of 'God'. Jesus endured it, as did the great mystics. It's greatly to be feared, but it isn't to be rejected, ignored or preached against.

There's something idolatrous in teaching that God will 'give us the desire of our hearts' or that he will 'honour our prayers and our desires'. It's selling an idea of God that is confined, cheap and altogether selfish. After all, God is under no obligation to give us what we want, and to assume that he's there to do so is to misunderstand his nature.

God is the wind that blows and the waves that crash. He'll permit the hardships of life to destroy our misconceptions of him. To insist doggedly in returning the posts to the former position is to work against him, and there is nothing more dangerous than to ignore the warnings of God.

Learning to do nothing

One of the hardest things in life is to learn to do nothing. I don't mean vegetating in front of the TV or having a lay-in at the weekend. I mean recognising that doing nothing can be an act of empowerment.

We're such busy people. We rush here and there, trying to make things happen. In a universe that threatens to be meaningless, we find meaning in what we accumulate: friends, wealth, status but most of all, activity.

In one sense, this is all nonsense. My clothes, my house and my possessions aren't me and they say very little about me. They're statements about the age in which I live and the culture into which I was born; they aren't statements about me as a person. Not really.

If you want to know whether your life has meaning, look inside yourself. Don't look at your friends (who come and go) or your family (who will die) or your partner (who might leave you) or you job (which you may lose) or your wealth (which may disappear). Stop. Think. What gives your life meaning?

The fact that you exist.

This isn't the most exciting revelation, I agree, but a profound one nonetheless. It's so obvious we pass it by. I can hear you saying, 'well of course I exist otherwise I wouldn't be reading this. Tell me something interesting.'

But it is interesting. First comes our existence, and then comes everything else. In the big scheme of things, everything else is valueless.

Thomas Merton, the 20th century mystic, said that he'd learnt after years of silent meditation that it was enough just to be. He didn't need to justify his existence or supplement it with grand gestures or great wealth. He just needed to accept that he existed and live in peace with that knowledge.

This is the hidden teaching of faith, and we see it manifested in the life of Christ. Until we learn it, we can never let go of ourselves and discover who we really are. Yet to choose to accept it and live by it is hard. In fact on one level it's almost impossible. All of us have insecurities that we want to hide under layers of accumulated success.

But true autonomy isn't demonstrated by how much money we have or how popular we are. It's seen in our courage to be no-body. The real children of God are the people who take this path and live Christ's life. This isn't to decry the wonderful work many people do; it's to point out that most of us do what we do because we fear being invisible.

In many ways, modern day Christianity is a 'busy' religion. We're always rushing here and there, doing good works and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. But the Dalai Lama was right to point out how little spiritual practice there is in the every day workings of the faith. This is a tragedy because Jesus was a deeply spiritual man.

Many of us would benefit from doing nothing for a while. We should stop trying to please God and meditate instead on the wonder of our existence. Then we'll see that our lives have meaning devoid of anything that we do. From this starting point we might learn to do the works of the Kingdom in the way Jesus did them, in quiet measured acceptance that God is God, and that is all.

Communion

Thomas Merton wrote: "The deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept."

In our world, communication is important. It's necessary and quantifiable. It expresses ideas and facts. It permits us to share information and gain knowledge. If I want to know how to get from A to B it helps if someone gives me instructions. On the telephone a friend can tell me of their day and over the email I can laugh with my sister at the other end of the world.

But communication isn't communion. It doesn't convey our deepest hopes and yearnings. It can be the mode by which communion is expressed but when you say, "I love you" the words themselves are empty. Their power rests only in the

way they evoke communion, a communion that's moved beyond the realm of language into a deeper place.

When we fail to communicate we get frustrated. But when we fail to commune we suffer. Merton says that communion "is something the deepest ground of our being cries out for, and it is something for which a lifetime of striving would not be enough."

When it comes to God we can't convey adequately the communion we seek if we seek it through words.

Communion is quietness and stillness, a deep and sudden awareness. It can't be quantified and it can't be known. In that sense it's like love; it has no logic and no words to describe it.

In communion God isn't an object out there to be discovered but the Unknown to be experienced. The barriers between object and subject disappear and all that is left is the sudden realisation that everything is now, and all at once. It's a merging of subjects. In this sense, it's akin to love when barriers that separate people disappear.

It's no small wonder that Merton's spirituality was deeply affected by Eastern thought. In Buddhist teaching he discovered awareness so deep that only compassion and peace could emerge from it. Although he never wavered from belief in a Trinitarian God, he believed that revival in the Church could only happen once it had grasped the wisdom of the East.

In many ways, the Buddha-nature and the Christ-nature are similar. Love, compassion, peace, truth can only emerge in the person who has attained true understanding, who has moved beyond the appearances of the world to the Ultimate Reality beneath it. Merton believed that once a person knew everything, they rejected nothing nor did they question or strive or fret. They didn't push to be right but gave freedom to all and were thus able to live in freedom from all.

Moving on:

Arriving in London in August with a suitcase 15 kilos overweight, a laptop hanging from my shoulder and an old

holdall of last minutes necessities, was a sweaty experience. Worse yet was finding myself in a second floor flat the size of most people's sitting room. For an hour I paced the edges of my new home like a tiger in the zoo, wondering how I was going to cope.

Moving on is never easy even for those of us who have done it all our lives. You never get used to the pain of separation. You may be better prepared for the experience, and you may know that the dark clouds will clear, but the dark clouds come all the same and you have to endure their passing.

Yet, 'moving on' in any form is a creative act. It involves vision, faith, and hard work. It's akin to sculpturing a piece of marble. A sculptor contemplates the marble in which he sees a latent potentiality. But it's only through the toil of designing, chipping and polishing that he brings out a work of art.

So it is with us.

To be human is to be creative; it's the echo of the Divine within us. The universe is in a state of becoming. It both 'is' and 'can be'. We have the power to participate in its on-going creation because we too are in a state of potentiality.

God has given us one duty: to create something beautiful of our lives. In the end there are no excuses for what we are and what we become. At every moment of our lives we have the choice to be more than what we are. The vision is ours.

That's why the vision must be great, not the greatness of wealth, fame and physical beauty, but of the spirit.

A great spirit, nonetheless, is a sacrificial spirit. The sculptor sacrifices his time, energy and sleep in pursuit of the sublime. He labours painfully and strenuously to call forth a dream. We can only hope to be truly great if we're willing to endure the sacrifice of self-creation. Nothing else will suffice.

Perhaps this is why Christianity is so powerful a faith. It knows the cost of sacrifice. No Christian can remain the same person at the end of their life as they were when they first believed; they are forever in a state of becoming. This is God's call on our lives. A stagnant Christian is a lifeless Christian, just as a stagnant human is lifeless human.

The Church and World Issues

Inclusivism.

The writer of John's Gospel has Jesus saying: "when I am lifted up I will draw all people to me." He understood this to be a reference to his death; others believe it refers to the ascension.

How should we understand it in the 21st century?

Our post-modern post-Christian age considers itself inclusive of religion, gender, and sexuality. It prides itself in being liberated from ways of thinking that oppressed minorities in the past.

This approach is rooted in the Enlightenment and the growing awareness that objective truth is elusive. The philosopher Kant pioneered a way of thinking that has its final expression in the relativism of our present day. He said that we can't know things as they truly are, only as they appear to us; there is Truth, but we don't know what it is.

This has left the Church harassed. After all, Christianity claims ownership of the Truth. As a result, different churches have taken different approaches to resolve the problem.

Some have clung to the assurance of a by-gone age when scripture was considered inerrant and revelation was absolute and unchanging. Others have evolved with the times, taking on board scientific discoveries, psychological theories, and the experience of living with other cultures.

An inclusivist approach is one that rejoices in being a child of its time. It doesn't live or think in a vacuum and it doesn't deny the intellectual advances of our time. In this respect, inclusivism is rooted in a particular approach to revelation.

Rather than believing the Bible to be a book of true propositions about God recorded by different writers, it's seen as a story that plots mankind's search for God and the evolution of our awareness of Him. Insights into the divine nature are overlaid (and under-laid) with cultural and social anomalies.

For this reason, an inclusivist doesn't reject homosexuality just because some passages in the Jewish Law and the Letters of the New Testament condemn it. Rather, it recognises how far we've progressed in our understanding of human sexuality

and gender. It finds God's grace in the acceptance of people, not in their exclusion.

This is Jesus drawing all people to himself.

Theologically, inclusivism is also a position taken on the world religions. Rather than holding that only those who accept Christ are saved, it recognises that other religious traditions can mediate God's grace.

This isn't saying that all religions are equal, but that the God of grace can be known in them. It argues that, since God wants all men saved, salvation must be available outside the church. After all, many people today and in the past haven't heard the gospel. Karl Rahner calls such people 'anonymous Christians'.

Naturally this raises theological issues. How can salvation be found in other faiths if we wish, at the same time, to argue for redemption being a historical as well as a spiritual event?

Aquinas and subsequent writers such as C S Lewis have spoken of a moral law written into the fabric of the universe to which all men are bound. This exists outside of revelation and can be known by anyone. Those who obey it are blessed by God.

Others look to the Trinity. If the Three Persons of God are all equal, then a person who worships the Father 'in spirit and in truth' (a Muslim or Jew for example) is thereby also worshipping the Son, just as a Christian is worshiping the Father through obedience and dedication to the Son.

Inclusivism calls Christians to live God's grace through their acceptance of others, irrespective of their creed or gender. It leaves judgement to God, and seeks to offer a renewed understanding of the redemptive love of Christ that changes lives and gives hope to us all.

Religion and science

Recently I watched a television programme about "Intelligent Design". Certain southern states in the USA want

schools to teach Creationism along side evolution. Europe has responded in horror. And I'm dismayed.

I wrote to the television programmers explaining how the science/religion debate has moved on from this simplistic dichotomy. It's time the programmers stopped giving so much airtime to religious fundamentalists and militant atheists like Richard Dawkins. Rather, let others speak who will offer a more balanced assessment of what is going on.

They never answered me.

It's true that science has destroyed God as an explanatory device. This 'God of the Gaps' has been used to explain any phenomenon we don't understand. Each time we find a solution, God is pushed further back until he isn't needed to explain anything at all. Understandably, many religious people have been shocked by this development and have entrenched themselves in old ways of thinking.

But the science/religion debate has never really been a debate between scientific thought and religious thought. The four major revolutions that have taken place in our way of thinking about the universe have been revolutions between old science and new science.

Galileo, Newton, Darwin and Quantum Theory questioned the scientific orthodoxy of their time, not religion. The problem for religions such as Christianity was their adoption of the former science when it was as its height, investing it with 'truth' claims that were later shown to be wrong. Galileo didn't argue against a Biblical view of the universe; he was arguing against an Aristotelian cosmology that had held sway for over a thousand years. That the Christian thinkers had accepted Aristotle and had married his science to scripture was an historical inevitability. That was the paradigm through which everyone thought at the time. Galileo's revolution was to offer a new paradigm, a new way of thinking. The effect was incalculable across intellectual Europe.

Today we're entering a new paradigm. The stories that science is telling us about the nature of reality are so extraordinary that most of us have trouble understanding them. Darwin began the revolution; quantum theory has taken

it further. The repercussions will be enormous; we're on the threshold of a change that will shift our understanding from mechanical materialism to something far more bizarre. In time this new way of thinking will affect all our lives.

Religion, as one aspect of our social and cultural existence, is caught up in this movement. Unless a religious person can claim to have total knowledge of God (which is impossible) then they must heed what science is saying. Science can be wrong of course, but generally it moves us towards a greater understanding of how our universe works.

The point then is this: if there is a God who 'created' the universe than science will be amenable to it even if some scientists are avowed atheists. Yet, since God is outside the universe, science can never make him known. Science, after all, deals with the universe and all that is in it, not with forces outside of it.

It's inevitable, perhaps, that religious people will cling to the old paradigm, but this insecurity has to be combated.

I'm no expert in quantum theory but I know that for many physicists mind – not matter – is probably the true definer of reality. This is nothing new. In the 18th century the philosophers Berkley and Kant said as much (albeit in different ways). It also makes a lot of sense. Try these two mind games:

1) Do your clothes possess colour when you aren't looking at them? I'm wearing a blue top as I write this. It's blue because I'm looking at it. When I'm not looking at it, it isn't blue. It just has properties that will make it appear blue when I see it. Colour is nothing more than light rays entering the retina that become electrical impulses and are translated by the brain. It isn't an intrinsic property of my top. Colour is brain dependent.

2) Look at the newspaper before you and close your eyes. Open them again can and prove to those around you that the newspaper continued to exist while your eyes were shut. Touching it won't solve the problem nor will asking others whether it was still there. Your senses feed your brain with electrical impulses. Remove the senses and how do you know

that anything exists except your thoughts? May be everything you experience is brain-fabricated, just like your dreams.

If mind is the determiner of reality then religious cosmologists may be right in saying there is a 'mind' behind reality that determines everything that is. This 'mind' is what we call God. If these physicists are right, than science is the friend of religion, not the enemy.

Secularism

It was bizarre to walk down Singapore's Orchard Road, in the suffocating humidity of the 23rd December, and pass by a full-size nativity scene. When was the last time I saw such a thing in London?

As Europe falters over religion, lurching from attempts to ban jokes against it to publishing offensive cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, Singapore continues to enjoy a quiet marriage of acceptance.

There are no Bank Holidays. Instead, the four main ethnic groups celebrate their religious festivals openly in the streets: Malays, Indian and Chinese. Christmas and Easter are commemorated along with Visak Day, Hari Raya, Divali and the like. In keeping with the country's universality, there are also the secular celebrations of Labour Day and National Day.

Singapore doesn't believe a blanket exclusion of religious values from public life facilitates constitutional fairness or liberty. This is in stark contrast to Britain's confusion over how to deal with the issue.

The difference goes back to secularism's intellectual fathers: Holyoake and Bradlaugh.

Holyoake was an agnostic. He said in 1870, "Secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it is one independent of it. … Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, and act forever."

Bradlaugh, on the other hand, was an atheist and argued that secularism should work to exclude religion from public life. Overtime, Bradlaugh's position has taken center-stage, with unfortunate consequences.

People need their account of reality to be plausible, and this requires a degree of support from the society around them. If this support is weakened then, as Peter Berger writes in his book, *A Rumor of Angels*, people will have to work hard at maintaining their beliefs in the face of society's dominant and differing creed.

This is the experience of a religious person living in a strongly secular culture. They feel under siege and as a result, affirm their beliefs more strongly. When this is heightened by racial problems, we have the rise of fundamentalist doctrines, such as those taught in Islamic madrasahs.

For this reason alone we need to be cautious of militant secularism and question its benefits to our present age.

We must also recognise the secularists' fear that some religious leaders will abuse their freedom to justify violence or to coerce belief. Television footage of militant Muslims marching in battle gear outside the EU offices in Palestine does little to alleviate this concern.

Yet there is something wrong with a secularism that forces people to choose between itself and their religion. In much of Europe there is contempt for our Christian heritage even though our secularist creed was born out of it. This is seen in the European Constitution, which would rather mention the influences of the Ancient Greeks and the Enlightenment than the church.

A healthy separation of religion and state is necessary of course. But this isn't the same as a radical secularization that denies all public manifestation of religion.

There's a need within the wider society to rid the public of the notion that 'secular' means neutral and 'religion' means ignorance. This is the responsibility of the media. Religious belief has a rational basis and there's no morality that stands on neutral ground.

Singapore's government is secular because its authority is derived from the democratic process. However the constitution requires the government to protect the religious interests of the Malays as the indigenous people. As a result it has aligned public holidays to religious celebrations and has thereby introduced a liberating factor to its own brand of secularism. This is a direct result of the Asian call to minimize the spiritual damage often caused by modern humanism.

Should we follow Singapore? Letting religion back into the public sphere of society isn't necessarily the answer, but there needs to be more attention given to the spiritual needs of the people.

Loving others

Yesterday, I was talking about notions of reality to a class who are new to philosophy. "Prove to me the book continues to exist while your eyes are closed," I said. One claimed he could hit it, another that she could hear it being hit. "Take away your senses," I said, "and now prove it to me."

They couldn't. Yet, they assured me, it continued to exist. Common sense required it to be so. Where would the book have gone? Things don't just disappear.

So I told them to look at the book carefully and ascertain its colour. "Red," they agreed. I held it to the light, then put it in the shade, and asked them what type of red they were talking about. I did the same with its shape; I held it at different angles and asked them to describe it.

The point? We infer things from experiences, but we never really see them as they truly are. We can't.

If we lack certainty about the world we live in, how can we be sure we're right about the 'other world' of faith and religion? After all, when we talk of God we're talking about a reality that's outside time and space and removed from anything we can experience directly.

So how can we be sure that what we say about God is true?

If we're honest we can't. We use a combination of logic, experience, historical accounts of other people's experiences, our sense of morality and justice, our highest ideals, hopes and the longing for something greater.

This doesn't mean that God is an illusion, or even a neurosis, as Freud would have it. It doesn't mean that God is *only* a construct of the human mind. But it does mean that we need to be generous and cautious in our claims about God. We need to be more open-minded.

You only have to watch the play "The Royal Hunt of the Sun" to be reminded of the sins the church has committed against those who think differently.

This is why it's a tragedy that certain sections of the Christian church continue to practice a theology of exclusion. They lay down hard rules and fixed boundaries: if you're homosexual; if you're lesbian; if you're female priest; if you're an evolutionist; if you're not a Christian – then we don't accept you and neither does God. I've heard leaders of some churches condemn parishioners for marring outside the Christian community. And I've even heard them berate women for using anti-aging creams!

These people live in fear. Fear of a world in which doubt and uncertainty is everywhere. They build high walls and create prisons. They draw people into their churches, promising security while stealing from them the freedom of an expansive and inclusive Love.

We must love, Mother Teresa said, until it hurts and then keep on loving. But you can't love with conditions. You can't love someone of another faith, and try you're damnest to convert them. You can't love a homosexual while demanding that he either repent or live a life of celibacy.

That isn't how God loves. How can I be sure? I can't. But I know that there's freedom when we accept people for who they are, and judgement and unhappiness when we don't.

Challenging the church

It's surprising how much time we dedicate to raising money for charity in this country. Yet, for all our generosity the amount we give in relation to the amount we earn is falling.

Supposedly the greatest decline is within the 18-35-age range. Even more startling, the number of youngsters applying for jobs in the charitable sector has dropped markedly.

Let's not deceive ourselves: we live in a materialistic, hedonistic age. We want to be rich!

As Christians, this should set us thinking. Why do we talk so much about sexuality and say so little about wealth? Jesus didn't. He spoke more about the seductive power of money than almost anything else, except for the Kingdom of God, and then he argued that wealth was a hindrance to it.

Why? Surely money brings better health, better education and better social facilities. It can be a source of good.

It can also divide and separate people. It bestows a sense of worth on some, while subjecting others to degradation. It frees one man, and enslaves another. It's an invisible force of control and power.

The Church is often silence on this issue. In the West we hear about personal morality and in the Third World, about social justice. Yet the Christian must be master of both if he's to remain true to the Gospel.

Our age is thoroughly confused about sex, and the Church is right to challenge us. Yet greed is just as insidious an evil as child pornography. Greed divides society and nations. It even divides us from the natural environment of which we're a part. So why does the average church say little about wealth as a question of personal morality?

There are no easy answers. Jesus' teaching was no better received in his age than it is in ours, so the problem doesn't lay in the economic system, be it capitalism or socialism.

The problem lies in the heart of man. Jesus never condemned wealth in and of itself. He condemned our attitude towards it. We believe money confers value on an individual; and we believe that the power of money is sufficient to buy independence from God. Such beliefs are illusory.

Surely, then, the Church must challenge us more? It isn't enough to give money to charity. The man who tithes 10% of his earnings and yet believes wealth confers grace, is no saint.

Personal morality isn't a question of outward acts, but inner attitudes. It's our approach to wealth that should be explored, our tendency to rank individuals by their bank accounts.

It's time the church spoke out. It shouldn't only raise money but also raise questions. It must comfort its people and challenge its congregations. It must challenge itself.

Animal rights

At last our society is waking up. Our relationship with animals isn't simply a question of endangered species but of livestock as well. Cheap food is a marvellous commodity, but the ethics of it have to be considered.

Why, then, have Christians neglected the issue for so long?

It's interesting that the Old Testament is specific on its treatment of farm animals: it rejects all forms of abuse. The New Testament, on the other hand, says little but what it does say is important: God remembers every creature that lives, even the smallest sparrow sold for food in the market place.

Yet it's the story of creation that best explains our role within the natural world. Born from it and sustained by it, humanity is called by God to tend the 'garden'. We're to 'rule over' it and to 'subdue it'. Unfortunately, this story has led to much confusion.

One interpretation, thankfully now refuted, developed from Gnostic and Neo-Platonist thought (in which spirit was superior to nature). It argued that Nature was to be conquered. Corrupt and finite, it had no spirit. Only humanity, with a soul that is redeemable, was capable of salvation. Just as we subdue our own natural instincts, so we must subdue the natural world around us.

The more prevalent interpretation, calls us to rule over the 'garden' in the same way as God rules over the universe: with

justice, love and wisdom. Animals aren't created solely for human use, but for the pleasure of God: they deserve our respect.

Where God gives life, mankind is called to nurture that life. Good stewardship is service. Mankind is called by God to serve his creation.

What ethic, then, should the Church promote? A balanced one, in my opinion. There is nothing wrong with theology being human-centric. Humanity is made in the image of God, sharing his the ability for abstract and moral thought.

Much of the animal rights movement ignores this fact. In its desire to readdress the balance, it's forgotten the qualitative difference between the rest of the animal kingdom and us.

This is important because ethical problems arise when human interests conflict with those of the other animals. It's good to provide cheap food; hunger remains a reality in the UK. But who takes precedence? Children or lambs?

Like St Francis, we must remember that we're all created from the same source and in that sense we and the other animals are siblings. But animals are non-moral beings; they don't think in terms of right or wrong. They can't have rights, if rights involve an understanding of obligation. Our duty towards them is rooted in out stewardship alone.

We have the duty to ensure their lives, however short, are fulfilled and their deaths are quick and painless. We don't lock them up in cages and cut off their beaks; we don't transport them for miles in abject conditions. Many farming methods are unacceptable, but in the end agricultural policy will be decided by economics. Because of that, we have the power to affect policy decisions.

Those of us blessed with decent incomes should use our money to buy foods reared in ethical conditions. This isn't easy – I preach to myself! – but as long as we put our wallets before our beliefs, we'll be acting as poor stewards.

Female ordination

Female ordination remains a controversial issue. The Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches don't practice it and there are many Anglican Priests who wish their church didn't. Despite theological arguments in their defence, there is an assumption at the heart of their case, which concerns me.

If women can't be priests, if we're unable to represent Christ at the altar, if we're excluded from performing the sacramental practices of the Church, then the Church is saying that women aren't created fully in the image of God.

It's saying (indirectly) that our humanity is incomplete and that only in the male sex does the image of God fully rest. Men stand before us as the greatest expression of God's intention in creation. And God, though distinct in his ontology, is more male in his personality than female.

Of course this position isn't wrong because I object to it. That would be like arguing that children should be treated as grown-ups because they want to be. No, it's wrong because the Bible doesn't support it.

If we accept that the Bible is the inspired word of God, mediated through the minds of historical men living in specific cultural traditions, then it's foolish to focus on a few passages that condemn women to a position of silent inferiority. It's like seeing the trees and forgetting the wood. It ignores the bigger picture.

How can we imagine that God would have entrusted a woman with the birth, care and nurture of his Son, were we incomplete? Would he really have given Mary the awesome responsibility of educating His Son into love, compassion and knowledge were she unable to teach him about God? Would he have done all that and then turned round and said, 'Thanks Mary, but I hope you don't expect to share in his ministry or proclaim his Gospel: you're only a woman, after all'?

The son of Mary gave the world the most liberating Gospel ever known; the most revolutionary and controversial creed, so freeing in its compassion and understanding that it's challenged civilisations ever since.

That Gospel said that all captives should be freed so that humanity can stand on level ground before God. In Jesus's time, that included the poor, the crippled, the deformed, the mentally ill and the diseased. It also included the women and the children, the prostitutes and the drunks, the tax collectors and the gentiles. It was an attack on the social order of his day; it's an attack on our social order as well.

Oppression in any form is unacceptable to God. We forget the Sermon on the Mount was given to both sexes. Mary may have sat at Jesus' feet in her house listening to him talk while her sister hurried about the cooking and washing, but on that day thousands of women were gathered about Him. And just as Jesus affirmed that it was more important for Mary to attend to God's word then do the housework, so he was saying to every woman present: 'You're greater than what you do. You're worth more that your childbearing abilities and your household duties."

He said as much to the women as to the men: 'Don't hide your light under a bushel.' He said to both sexes: 'You can be great in the Kingdom of God.'

If we could see that Jesus' masculinity isn't the point of the Incarnation, but his humanity, we'd hear God calling women to be fully what he's called them to be: co-workers in the Kingdom of God, be that as a mother, a housewife, the person who arranges the flowers in the church, the lay reader or the ordained minister.

St Paul said The Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh, conferring on all flesh the authority and power to proclaim the Gospel, conferring without favouritism or sexism, the gifts of teaching, prophecy, preaching and hospitality.

So let's not forget that the first preacher of the Gospel was a Samaritan woman and the first witness to the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene.

Some women can now celebrate the Eucharist because finally, after 2000 years, the Anglican Church has recognised just how inclusive Jesus' call for liberation actually is. When will the rest of Christendom follow suit?

The Ten Commandments

What are the Ten Commandments?

The hostage taking and murder of school children in Ossetia, Beslam reminded us of many things: hatred, cruelty and desperation. It reminded us that 'right' and 'wrong' aren't questions about morality alone but of history too; of memories that won't die and wounds that won't heal. It taught us that anger and violence are wheels that turn under their own momentum and are difficult to halt. The Chechens haven't forgotten Stalin or the brutal suppression of recent years, and though this doesn't justify what the rebels did, it reminds us that our actions today will have consequences tomorrow.

As human beings we're capable of great goodness; but we're also egoistical, territorial and violent.

When Moses freed the Israelites from Egypt and led them into the desert, he was the leader of a large rabble. They had little sense of identity and no unified social organisation. Having been slaves for so long, they didn't understand self-rule and the responsibilities it required. Duty was to the family and the tribe. Moses had the thankless task of turning them into a nation.

How did he do it?

He gave them a God that stood over them as a King, and with this King he made a covenant. He taught them a history, and promised them a land. In short, he focussed their sense of who they were beyond the confines of self towards something greater: the People of Israel.

Much of what he did was modelled on what he already knew: covenants between Kings and people were common in the Middle East at the time, and they were generally written on clay tablets.

But the revolution Moses wrought was not only the making of a people; it was the instituting of a legal system. The Invisible God of the Israelites wasn't a just parochial deity; he was the God of all humanity and his law was universal.

This law was understood on two levels: on the level of the individual and on the level of the community. Breaking the covenant wasn't only a private affair but a public one as well. Everyone was affected by its outcome.

The law was built upon ten immovable pillars: the Ten Commandments. These Commandments are the most influential piece of legal writing ever. They underpin the teachings of the West and the teachings of the Middle East.

Yet they're widely misunderstood today.

It's easy to read the Ten Commandments as a list of uncompromising laws. Don't do this, don't do that. Instead, they should be read in the manner in which the Israelites first heard them: as a call to freedom.

The Israelites knew all about slavery; they'd just escaped it. Now they were a free people needing to know how to live well so that Life, and not Death, would follow them.

Do not kill, do not steal, do not commit adultery; these commands opened up life for the Israelites, rather than closed it down because they focussed attention on the outer limits of conduct, not on specific behaviour. They advised against actions that had the potential to destroy. Like the shepherd's stick, the commands stretched out to heed the wayward sheep about to plunge to its death over the ravine.

It isn't much different for us today. But in some ways the stakes are higher. We're a global community full of discourse, rivalry and violence. We need to know how to live so that Life rather Death follows us. If we could see that the Ten Commandments exist to preserve creation then we'd walk in the vast field of safety they have stack out for us.

Honour our parents?

Child-abuse is as prevalent in our age as in any other, but our culture is more vigilant. Surely, then, a child is under no obligation to honour the parents who have abused it, whatever the Bible says.

There's no easy answer to this.

On a simplistic level, we owe our parents our existence and so we should be grateful to them for giving us life whatever else we might think of them. Practicing gratitude is vital to our

emotional well-being. The old fashion refrain 'count your blessings' is good advice.

They also tried their best to bring us up. This doesn't mean they did a good job, or they should be lauded for the methods they used (often they should be reprimanded). But they're human beings apt to make mistakes. As Aquinas said, we all seek the good, even when we have mistaken an evil for a good.

On a sociological level, our parents are the centre of the nuclear family. Society is like a wall existing of the 'bricks' that compose it. For society to be healthy it must be able to practice on a macro level what it has learnt on a micro level: forgiveness and understanding.

It's obvious, then, that the command to 'Honour' is wide-ranging and open-ended. Obedience isn't included. Rather, it focuses on considerateness, appreciation, and the care of elderly parents.

It's interesting that the promise at the end of the commandment "so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God has given you" isn't really a promise at all. It's more of a warning; if the command isn't obeyed the individual and the community will suffer. This is self-evident. All about us we see the results of family disintegration and its effect on society as a whole.

There is, however, a deeper understanding of this commandment, which only makes sense within a religious context. The parent/child relationship is the fundamental order of creation. It mirrors the relationship between God and man. Just as a child is called to honour its parents as its 'creators' and it 'sustainers' so we're called to honour God.

The Decalogue, as a legal document, is similar to many legal documents of the time. Moses didn't invent the structure; rather he copied it from his neighbours. At the time, a King would place himself in a covenant relationship with a subject people by drawing up an agreement in which he promised to protect them in return for their obedience. The relationship was one of ruler and submitter.

In the Ten Commandments, however, we see a different relationship emerging. God stands over his chosen people as a

father. He doesn't so much command his people to honour his rule, as to evoke their loyalty through intimacy, love and fellowship. In an ideal world, a child will honour its parents because it loves them. Mankind will honour God when it learns to love him also.

Honour then, is built into the fabric of the universe. It upholds the relationship between the divine order and the created order. When the social order falls apart and a child suffers at the hand of an abusive parent, something ruptures in the divine order as well. The parent is accountable before God not merely for its perversion but because it has inverted the divine structure also. Yet the command to honour doesn't go away because of this. Rather its importance increases. If the child is to live long and happily in the land God has given it, it must be assisted in experiencing once again gratitude and forgiveness, not only towards it parents, but towards its world and its God.

The First Two Commandments

'Richard and Judy' did a survey a few weeks ago to find out whether astrology was the new religion. They asked a number of people two questions: first whether they could name any of the Ten Commandments and second to identify the birth sign of a person born on the 16th March. Not surprisingly, astrology came out the winner.

In our liberal age, the Ten Commandments are out of fashion. They offer a vision in which the world is clearly divided between God and man, and one in which the health of a person depends solely upon their relationship with the Divine. If a person is rooted in his creator, in a relationship of love and respect, he will be more able to relate to his fellows with honour and dignity.

Despite what many think, this vision is rather comforting. It implies that Bob down the street is going to have difficulty being faithful to his wife if he isn't first faithful to God. After

all, Bob is an animal whose instincts are directed towards procreation. A pretty woman comes his way, and his mind wanders. This is natural. It's the way the world functions. But God is calling Bob to be more than an animal. He's calling him to be like himself, faithful and just. Much the same goes for Beryl. She's in trouble at work and is tempted to lie to get herself out of it. Like any beast, Beryl cares about self-preservation. Lying is a natural thing to do. But again, God is calling Beryl to walk in the shadow of the Divine, to share in his nature and his personality.

So how are we to relate to God? Unsurprisingly, we're first asked to believe in him. "You shall have no other gods before me." Then we're called to stay true to that the vision. It isn't a case of saying "I believe there's a God" and then acting as if we believed the complete opposite. Belief impinges on action. If my belief is true, then I must live as if it were true. I'm not to hedge my bets, bowing to God on Sunday and worshipping manna on Monday.

Secondly we're not to make an idol of anything in the world and worship it. For the Israelites this was understood in the context of the idols of Egypt and Canaan where dead wood was given the status of divinity. This wasn't only misrepresenting God, but it was limiting his transcendence and fixing him in something that was static and lifeless. It gave man a sense that he could control God's presence through his own actions rather than through the grace of God himself, and ultimately it denied mankind the chance to experience God in his fullness.

For Christians the command took a different turn. After all God became human. He chose to limit his transcendence in the body of a man. To use images as aides to worship wasn't necessarily an evil, and today we've no problem with iconology.

But of course idolatry is more complex than a mere question of images; it is also a state of mind. Any preoccupation that takes us away from God is an idol of a sort, be it the television, our partner, or our love of money. This challenges us at the very depth of our nature, at the heart of

what it is to be human. For the greatest idol in the life of anyone is themselves. And this self isn't only vying for a central place in our lives, but it's a self that is fundamentally false. To quote a friend of the mystic Thomas Merton: "when the relative identity of my ego is taken to be my deepest and only identity, when I am thought to be nothing but the sum total of all my relationships, when I cling to this self and make it the centre around which and for which I live," then I am worshipping a false self and hence an idol.

My true identity is my identity in God, and my reason for living is to grow into that identity until I'm fully who I was created to be. To break the second commandment, then, is to deny myself the reason for which I live.

That's why the first two commandments are so important. It's where everything begins: to act out our belief in God and to refrain from worshipping ourselves. If we could master these two requests than we would find the other eight commandments easy to follow. But, of course, we can't. And for that reason we spend this life struggling to love God and our neighbour.

The Sabbath

The commandment to 'keep the Sabbath holy' has invoked a history of oppression. In Jesus' day the Pharisees - desperately trying to preserve the uniqueness of their religion before the occupying Romans - declared it a sin to cut one's toenails or to walk more than 30 paces during Shabbat.

Against such repressive interpretations, Jesus tried to talk some sense, explaining that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. He argued that it was a gift to creation, not a burden, and had less to do with redemption as to with the preservation of health and happiness for all, including foreigners, slaves and animals.

The point is simple. Shabbat is a divine invitation for creation to rest once in a while. We aren't expected to spend

the whole day in the synagogue or church, but in remembering God's role in creation. This is achieved as much at home as in a place of worship. Taking a stroll and contemplating nature is as beneficial as reading the scriptures. As the psalmist wrote: Be still and know that I am God. In the quietness we can stop striving. We have time to look about us, and in so doing, find the Creator behind the veil that separates us.

The beauty of the Sabbath is found in the story of creation. God rests on the seventh day; he pauses and takes a deep breath of satisfaction. In this moment of quiet, the created order is at one with itself.

The call to keep the Sabbath, then, is a call to peace. It's a promise that a new order will be established at the end of time when the world stops striving and finds its fulfilment in the knowledge of God.

To keep the Sabbath is to be involved in the evolution of creation at the moment when we sit back and stop still. It's not only a pause in our weekly routine that restores our sense of self and allows us the luxury of rest it's also a weekly reminder that one day peace will be given to all. In a sense, when we practice Shabbat we're stopping the world falling into chaos.

We can see this in our own lives. When we don't rest, we get physically and psychologically exhausted. The result is irritation, anger and frustration. In our fast frenetic world, it's hard to be quiet for a day. We may do it for an hour or so, but no more. Yet it takes a day to restore our sense of well-being.

Ask any mother who works all day at the office, comes home in the evening to feed the family and spends the weekend cleaning the house. When is she blessed by her husband before the children, as occurs at the Friday meal of a Jewish Shabbat? When is she allowed to leave the cooking and the housework to put her feet up and read a book for a day?

Ask any child who sees his father rush out of the house each morning and rush back again at night, who might have a few moments with him during the weekend before he goes off to play golf with his friends or settles down in the study to sort out the family finances.

Orthodox Jewish households have many laws surrounding the Sabbath that we would find oppressive, and the Christian isn't called to observe them. But the Christian is called to help our exhausted world recognise the value of the Sabbath. This isn't done by going on and on about the evils of commercialism and Sunday trading and forcing the country to follow a governmental decree. Rather we must teach people the value of rest within the family; of time out together; of the joy found in talking to each other and eating with each other on a regular basis.

Our society would be a better society if we observed the Sabbath. We have to find a way to convince the world that it isn't just another religious observation in an irreligious world, but the prerequisite for a healthy community.

Do not kill, and Euthanasia

Euthanasia won't leave us. In April, President Bush cut short his holiday to present himself at Congress in order to intervene in the case of Terri Shiavo. This unprecedented move alarmed many. President Bush may be deeply committed to his beliefs, but the interplay between religion and politics is concerning for those who fear the raise of fundamentalism and its blackmailing of the secular state.

Euthanasia won't rest because it can't rest. In our modern Western Culture the individual is sole guardian of himself. This leads to ideas about human life that differ from those of the past when our value was understood cosmically. Now, it is understood materially.

This isn't the horror some people conceive it to be. After all, just because some of us doubt the existence of the soul doesn't mean we thereby demean the uniqueness of the human race. Nor does it mean we automatically support abortion, euthanasia and other such contentious issues. Human life is no less valuable. It's just honoured in a different way.

We need to find a new way to engage with the debate. How do the secular and religious worlds dialogue when their premises are dissimilar? And how is compromise reached when there is no compromise within Christianity itself?

Both the Fundamentalist and the Liberal call on scripture to justify their concerns, but they do so differently. The Fundamentalist points to the 6th Commandment, "you shall not murder", as a divine law which once broken condemns us to the status of Cosmic Criminal. They consider scripture to be the inerrant word of God that can be studied but not changed, and which is never subject to the vagaries of culture. If God has said 'no' he has said so for eternity.

Liberals, on the other hand, consider revelation to be less a case of God preaching to humanity, as humanity searching for God within the confines of culture and history.

These differences have a profound effect on the way in which the churches deliberate over ethical problems. Yet when it comes to the taking of human life, there isn't so much disagreement about the dangers of euthanasia as arguments about how one should advise the secular world.

Fundamentalists tend to be uncompromising. Liberals are conciliatory. As a result some consider Liberals to be wishy-washy while others see Fundamentalists as unloving and judgemental.

To get out of this mess, we need to stop talking about values. This is unhelpful, since we all value human life. Likewise we need to stop talking about right and wrong, and start finding common ground from which to proceed.

Let me pose some avenues for discussion.

The religious person believes we're created by God. Creation here has to be understood in a wide sense. Creation is a process rather than an act. It's growth, development and interaction. While the religious person sees this in terms of a God, the secularist may see it in terms of natural forces. Here there is a meeting point, for as long as the secularist appreciates the wonder of the natural forces, he can understand the debt the religious person feels towards God. In this sense a

compromise could be reached: that life is a marvel and should be protected at all reasonable costs.

Euthanasia is a mode of killing. But is it murder? This is a semantic problem. If we consider murder to be "an act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit or for personal gain," then most cases of euthanasia are not murder. We can then agree that euthanasia on occasions might be the most loving thing to do. To end a life isn't to declare that life worthless; it's to say that there comes a point when death – the fate of us all – is knocking on the door and must be heeded. The religious world needs to recognise this.

The tragedy is that some cases of euthanasia will be rooted in the selfish desires of others, either because they no longer wish to care for the person or they hope to gain financially from their death. In these cases, euthanasia is murder.

The legal nightmare is how one legislates against murder in these situations. We're entering the inner world of motivation and it's notoriously difficult to prove selfishness. The option then is to ban all forms of euthanasia until, through thought, consideration and proper dialogue a law can be formulated that protects the innocent.

I'm hopeful that governments have learnt lessons from the abortion laws and will be cautious. I believe the religious voice now playing a role in politics can help to constrain militant forms of secularism while forbidding fundamentalism from hijacking the debate. However, until a law can be devised that maximises the freedom of all while protecting the rights of the weak, euthanasia should not be permitted. After all wisdom is the gift of God and when we practice it, along with compassion and love, we're emulating the divine.

The Christian Year

Advent: the waiting game

Advent will begin next weekend, the season of waiting. In the past churches used to cover their statues and wait in sombre anticipation for the arrival of the Messiah. Then on Christmas Eve the lights were lit and the celebrations began.

Waiting is a skill few of us develop with any ease. We hate to wait for the bus, for dinner, for the day to be over so we can go home. We can't even wait for Christmas any more. Yet learning to wait is one of the most important lessons life can teach us.

Our impatience can result in shattered dreams. The person who must possess all his new loves immediately or the youngster who can't wait to get drunk on alcohol has lost something important. And this is tragic. What was promised as special becomes mundane, and disappointment takes its place.

Too frequently we grab an experience before its time and in that sense become violent rapists of our own lives. What we call taboos are often experiences that society – in its wisdom – has left to mature, like wine, to be tasted when the time is right, not before.

For many of us impatience bothers our lives, but nothing more. We quickly learn self-discipline and grow up. For others, it can be disastrous, and for society, catastrophic.

Disillusion is at the heart of many social ills because it's the death of our dreams. Yet today society encourages children to grab experience now, to know everything now and to be part of the entirety of life's experiences now. Why? What are we so scared of? That our world will end tomorrow?

Waiting requires hope, of course. We must have faith that the thing for which we wait will be ours one day. But hope is hard especially when it's rooted in nothing. Then it isn't hope at all but the crossed fingers of the fatalist. After all, we're too frail and impermanent to be the ground of our own dreams.

Christianity is about waiting and about hoping. Like the people of Israel who waited for the Messiah through centuries of suffering, so during Advent we taste something of their desperate expectation. And like Jesus who waited for thirty

years to begin his ministry, we learn to let the years shape us individually.

If we're to be fully who we're called to be, then we must learn to wait. To wait is to gain the world. To be impatient is to lose it. Truth is ephemeral; we can know it only when the time is right. To steal that experience too early is to cheat ourselves out of something precious.

Giving birth to God

The idea that God should deal with the world's problems by becoming a child is bizarre. It makes more sense for an omnipotent being to storm our world like a Hollywood strong man or an avenging Hindu god. At least Krishna, who also entered the world as a child, was clearly a deity: his mother looked down his throat and saw the universe held within him.

We need to reconsider our understanding of justice and God's nature if we're to make sense of this. A storm-trooping God is a threat to everyone, including the good, simply because there're no good people around. We might compare ourselves to others and feel smug at our righteousness, but God isn't interested in our perceptions, only in the truth. And we've all done enough to fear an avenging deity.

God, however, doesn't so much impose his power, as help to empower us in our daily lives. He doesn't so much judge us as call us to rethink our attitudes. He invites rather than threatens; he holds out a hand of welcome rather than a weapon of destruction.

In this way, Christ's birth into our world mirrors the birth of God into an individual's life. Just as Mary was invited to have a child, so we're invited to know God. And just as she found herself with a helpless infant that needed to be nurtured and coaxed into adulthood, so God becomes real in our lives through our consent and cooperation.

Mary was willing to incorporate into her soul the seed of God's nature and we are called to do the same: to allow the

nature of God to take such a hold in our lives that we 'carry' within us the reality of his existence until our own bodies become his flesh. This takes a lifetime and has probably never been fully realized by any one, except Jesus.

Yet, we all experience a gestation period during which God becomes more real to us. Often we learn through painful experience what it means to carry God within. The tearing apart of the old self so the new can come forth is a common Christian experience, and can occur many years after a person first believed. There is always a moment of reckoning when we realize that God has a different agenda to our own, that his demands are greater and he is less compromising than we realized. Giving birth to God is never easy.

For this reason, we must, like Mary, be willing to foster the Spirit of God within us. As Annie Dillard once said: "God's works are as good as we make them."

No doubt Mary made her mistakes; perhaps when she was tired she lost her temper, or maybe she didn't always appreciate the nature of Jesus' calling. In fact we know from the Gospels that she was often confused and unsure, yet she loved him and cared for him.

We're the same. We make mistakes and we do things we shouldn't. Yet all the time God is growing and developing within us, calling us to new levels of understanding. Frequently we don't understand and we're often confused, but in the end the majority of us follow as best we can.

Christmas

On the BBC website there are a collection of emails sent in answer to the question, "Has Christmas lost its meaning?" One message from Denmark made a real impression on me. I'll quote part of it here:

Christmas is a time of silence and loneliness, of tears that get frozen in their way out, of painful screams that are never released because they sound too horrible to a society that commands us to smile always, no

matter how much we are suffering, no matter how much pain is in our hearts.

This is a tragic piece of writing that expresses something at the heart of the Christmas story. For all the colour and ritual of the festive period, we forget there was nothing sensational about Jesus' birth. Unless we buy into the story of singing angels and bright shining stars, it was probably like everything else God does: a small overlooked event. Mary, a teenager was giving birth to a son who many suspected of being conceived out of wedlock. She was away from home and afraid; it would have been a time of loneliness, tears and pain.

Not that we know much about Jesus' birth. Unlike his death (which is one of the best recorded events in ancient history) the birth narratives are recorded in two gospels that contradict each other. In fact, much that we associate with the story is myth.

Take the donkey for example. There's no mention of Mary riding a donkey in the original texts nor did three Kings arrive from the Orient to stand about the manger.

Instead of a stable, it's likely that Jesus was born in a cave-house similar to those found in poor Palestinian villages today. These houses are built on two levels; the animals live below and the people 'above' on a platform. Since the word 'upper room' is generally agreed to be a better translation of the Greek than 'inn', it's likely that Mary and Joseph found lodging with distance relatives. After all in Luke chapter 2 it says that Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home. Mary would have had to lay Jesus in the animals' manger because there would have been no space for them on the 'upper room'.

Of course there are many scholars who question whether Jesus was ever born in Bethlehem arguing that the story of the Roman census doesn't cohere well with ancient history, neither in relation to dates nor to how a census was normally conducted.

But in some sense these problems aren't important. The birth narratives are working on a deeper level than historical fact alone. They're teaching something about the history of the

Jewish people in particular and the story of mankind in general. In this sense they speak into the pain of our shared humanity.

The story of the Jewish people was one of promise, exile and restoration. Jesus, as the Messiah, was from the house of David. To lay claim to his kingship he had to be born in the royal city of Bethlehem but like David, he came from humble stock. Since all people were to be blessed through him, the poor and the outcasts came to pay him homage. Later, when he was a toddler, so did the wise. Following in the footsteps of Isaac's sons, he left the Promised Land and travelled to Egypt where he remained until a later date.

In this sense, the Messiah re-enacted the history of his people. Whether this re-enactment was a historical fact or written into Matthew's gospel as mythological history is impossible to verify. After all, in first century Palestine, the concept of history was very different from our own and Matthew's gospel is 'Jewish' in orientation.

More importantly to us today are the social implications found in Luke's gospel. This was written for the non-Jewish people and here we learn that in the humility of his birth, the Messiah identified with those who suffered. In the rumours of his illegitimacy, he gave legitimacy to those who society rejected. In his ancestry (a prostitute, an adulterer, a foreigner) he restored dignity to those tainted by their past. His birth was an encapsulation of his later ministry: identification with humanity and a means through which humanity could experience God's concern.

In the end, the real beauty of the Christmas story is the message that our society has forgotten: that though Christmas is time of suffering for many, Jesus was born so that God could participate in that suffering and redeem it.

The Carol Service

A friend is threatening to write a "How to Survive Christmas" manual. She's allergic to the crowds, can't tolerate

the 'make you feel good' songs, and absolutely hates my favourite Spanish carol. The chorus goes: "But look how the fish are drinking in the river, look how they're drinking on seeing God born." Ok, it's weird but the music reminds me of large fires and open spaces, and if it's sung well it's really fast.

In Guernsey we greet Christmas with enthusiasm. We're subjected to a month of nodding reindeer and wobbling Father Christmases, music and lights.

And then there is the Carol Service.

At Elizabeth College there are two services: one for the juniors and one for the seniors. I remember everyone moaning at the prospect; most pupils swore they had better things to do. Yet when they walked down the night streets to the Town Church, the shops glittering and the sea raging against the harbour wall, their mood changed. Even the most rebellious boys grew hushed.

This is the magic of Christmas: in a mysterious building of burning candles and hushed tones, high pillars and strange statues, there is silence. Suddenly, an angelic voice sings the opening verse of "Once in Royal David's City", and for a moment everyone experiences the sublime.

The carol service is a ritual in a culture where ritual no longer exists. It's the last vestiges of a religious life in an age that has lost its religious consciousness. For this reason alone it's important. It permits mystery to enter our mechanised and materialistic lives.

For most congregations the carol service is the only chance they have of getting the 'non-believer' into their midst, and they need to greet the annual occurrence with wisdom as well as enthusiasm.

They should maintain a balance between the old and the new. Novelty is necessary to startle people out of their complacency, but it's important to minister to the needs of everyone, and most want to spend an hour singing loudly and being surrounded by dim lights and antiquated language. They want to experience transcendence without the demands a transcendent reality makes upon them.

The role of the Carol Service is similar to the role of Church of England as the established church. It's the one institution able to offer a spiritual experience to the masses that are otherwise uninterested in religion. Just as people flock to carol services to touch something they can't articulate and to experience something they can't comprehend, so the Church of England is there to be the voice of the people when a national tragedy occurs. It becomes the focus of national grief.

When Diana died, few complained about the role the Church of England played. Many knew Diana was ambivalent about religion. Yet that wasn't the point. The point was the ritual and the coming together.

Those of us who believe in God might despair at this tendency. But there is nothing wrong with it. Why shouldn't the swearing and world-weary Mrs Jones participate in a religious service, be it a carol service or some other ceremony? At least, for an hour she touches something exalted. Perhaps one day that touch will be sufficient to transform her. And if it isn't, who are we to tut and shake our heads? There are many attending our churches that are less considerate to the old lady living next-door, or less willing to wash the floors of a bed-ridden friend than Mrs Jones.

So let's pray our litigious and politically correct society doesn't do away with the carol service. Who knows, some crazed Council might decide the sound of carols spilling into the night air is offensive to passers-by and stop them. Until that day, however: Long may they live.

Lent

Pancakes one day, ashes the next. The great Lenten fast begins and then, forty days later, we gorge ourselves on hot cross buns and chocolate Easter eggs. What a crazy pendulum Christian worship is, swinging from feast to fast; it invites us to indulge our appetites one moment, and then calls us to deny them the next.

In an age of unlimited pleasure, or the belief in unlimited pleasure, Lent is a strange ritual. Yet it has a beauty of its own. The aspirations of millions echo through it and the ancient call for self-discipline bestows on it a dignity our age has long forgotten. Until we learn to want we can't appreciate the abundance of our lives, and until we learn self-discipline we can't practise our love of freedom. It's only in the loss of something that we discover our desire for it.

But, of course, the season of Lent is also about preparation. It might seem rather austere given the liberation party of Easter Sunday, but in many respects it should be.

For all the greatness of our species, I wonder whether we're so valuable as to warrant the torturing and the murdering of God himself. Yet this is what Christians believe God endured in human form when our greed and selfishness pinned him up against a piece of wood to die.

That is why we receive ashes on our foreheads in the shape of a cross, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Taken from the burning palm fronds of last year's Palm Sunday, they remind us that the Messiah needn't have died had we been less selfish. They're the sackcloth worn by each individual brave enough to admit she isn't what she could be.

They're also a symbol of ownership. We've been bought at a high price, and our allegiance is to God. He seals us with his sacrifice, just as in Revelations the servants of God 'have… the seal of God on their foreheads.' Many Christians believe the sign of the cross has always been the authoritative signature of Jehovah (Yahweh) even from the beginning of time. They recall Ezekiel 9:4-6 in which the Lord said to the prophet: 'Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark (literally a 'tav') upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.'

'Tav' is one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and in ancient scripts it is said to look rather like the Greek letter 'chi' (which happens to be two crossed lines, and is the first letter in the Greek word for Christ).

Ash Wednesday reminds us that we can't appreciate the mercy of God if we don't understand our need for mercy; nor

can we be grateful for salvation without recognising our need for it. Just as the Jew before the Priests in the Temple of Jerusalem laid his hand on the lamb chosen to carry the punishment of his guilt, so Christians lay their hands on the body of Christ as they receive the ashes. And just as the Jew watched the slaughtering of the lamb, the death that should have been his according to the Law, so Christians witness the slaughter of Christ and recall the unmerited mercy of God.

New Year

The Roman god, Janus, had two faces – one looking forward and one looking back. He was a symbol of wisdom, able to see all things, the future and the past, the visible and the invisible. He became associated with the New Year and was sought out for advice about the months ahead.

As the New Year approaches, most of us will be doing the same – reflecting on what has passed and dreaming into the future. Depending on our dispositions, we might scour the magazines reading our horoscopes, choosing to ignore what we don't like and devouring the promises of wealth, health and happiness. At the same time, we might be fearful and sad. Things have happened that were never meant to happen; it was a year of lost dreams and intermittent failures. Somehow the great hope with which the year began was lost amidst the struggles of life.

Yet these fears are the cancers we must destroy if we're to move on and tackle the task of living. Life is about death, and until we recognise this, we can never be free. Even before we're called to surrender our physical bodies, we're called to hand over our youth, our health and our physical attractiveness. These are real deaths and because they're real, they're painful. More than that, we're called at every step in our lives to turn away from the dreams that were never fulfilled, the loves that never materialised and the hopes that were dashed by circumstances we never foresaw.

Life is death and there is no better time to recall this than at New Year. All of us have a lot we need to leave behind this December. Like travellers, we have to abandon the country in which we've sojourned and meet the open road. Behind will remain the people who can't or won't join us, and the dreams that died in the dust. If we don't move on, then something of our vitality will die.

Christianity is about death and rebirth. Some people talk about two types of death: terminal death and paschal death. According to the monk, Rolheiser all deaths are paschal deaths if we receive them as such.

Paschal death is the death that is necessary for new life. It's the mystery woven into the fabric of the universe, even though we strain against it. We refuse to let go and in so refusing, we become bitter, resentful and frustrated. We live dreams, not reality, the 'if onlys' that consume us. On Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene clung to the resurrected Jesus desperate to retain what she'd known. But the physical man who she had loved was not the same, and he told her not to touch him. It must have seemed cruel, but it had to happen.

The old had to die for Mary to know the truth and for Jesus to be the Truth. This is what Christianity teaches.

If we die the many deaths we are called to die in this life, we will gain new loves, new dreams and new lives. We will move on. But it takes courage and it takes trust; trust that, in the end, God will never let us truly die.

Mothering Sunday

"Even now, if I need anything, I know I just have to ask. She seems to know what I need before I know it myself."

Vivien is speaking about her mother but the words might as well be my own. "She listens to me. That is the main thing. I never feel judged. She's just always there."

There is something about having grown inside our mother's womb that makes her the ultimate comfort in our lives. From

the moment of conception she nurtures us, cares for us and is always there for us. Those of us blessed with wonderful mothers are the richest people on earth. Life might be harsh and cruel, but we have known from infancy what it is to be loved. Psychiatrists understand the value of such fostering; it makes a person whole.

The film 'The Passion' depicts beautifully the close relationship between Mary and Jesus. We see Mary pacing the courtyard, sensing through love where her son is imprisoned; we see him staring up at the stone ceiling feeling her presence as she rests her cheeks on the paving stones above. She attends his flogging, and as he staggers along the Via Dolorosa, she runs to catch him fall, recalling the times she'd caught him as a boy on the dusty pathways of Galilee. Mel Gibson may lack historical facticity for some aspects of the film but there is little reason to doubt the love he displays on screen.

It's a shame the Protestant churches have given scant attention to this aspect of Jesus' life. After all, if he were fully human as well as fully God he would have experienced the love a son has for his mother. There is no doubt that their tender relationship played an important role in his ministry.

Of course we know there were occasions when Jesus drew away from his mother. At one point he tells the listening crowd that his mother and brothers are those who obey God. But this doesn't mean that he rejected her. He was just making a theological point.

In fact, we find many subtle references to Mary in Jesus' teaching. His parables are full of images that he must have learnt from her side, watching her work a small measure of yeast into the flour before baking it, or searching frantically for a coin she'd lost in the house.

We can see it in the way he valued children and family life. She taught him trust and love, and his high regard for women came from her also. He'd have witnessed first hand her faith and her patience, and he probably told her on many occasions to put aside the household chores to learn about God, just as later he told Martha to do the same.

Unlike other men of his time, he condemned the injustices that a male-dominated society inflicted on women. Disobeying social norms he conversed with them in public, and befriended the alienated: the prostitute, the ill, the adulterous. He was sensitive to their plight, especially those of the widow; he would have seen the precarious position his mother occupied after the death of his father, Joseph.

There's no doubt that Jesus loved his mother and that he cared for her as the eldest son of the family. I'm sure he sent her the odd pennies now and then, and disappeared on occasions to be with her. Perhaps he mended a chair or planed a door. May be he just went home to rest and hide from the crowds. Perhaps he simply enjoyed her cooking.

It's a shame the gospels say little about Mary. Yet from their silence we can discern much about her as a woman. She trusted her son and believed in him. She knew when to intervene and when to step back so that he might pursue his calling unfettered. She held no prominent position in his ministry and was rarely with him during the three years he travelled the country. Her role was that of the believer, pondering in her heart what she heard and saw, and in the quietness struggling to understand it all.

It was when the people turned against him and he was arrested that she took her rightful place once more. She travelled to Jerusalem to be with him. Tradition says she stood on the road as he passed by carrying his cross. This is the moment in film when Mary catches her tortured son and holds him in her arms. The next time she held him was on his death when they took him down from the cross.

As Mothering Sunday draws near we would do well to meditate on the story of Mary and Jesus.

Getting married

My cousin is getting married today so I thought I'd say something about marriage.

Of course, writing about marriage when you're not married is like giving legal advice when you're not a lawyer! I know nothing of the day-to-day experience, and can only imagine the joys and frustrations that accompany the state. All the same, it's been an intrinsic part of our culture for thousands of years and to risk a few comments is permissible, I'm sure. After all, Jesus never married but he had clear thoughts on the issue.

Marriage is an ideal. It's the dream that the love between two people is real and lasting, that we can find solace for our loneliness in another person, and that with this person we can make mistakes without fearing rejection. This has always been the case even if, in the past, marriage was more concerned with economics than it is today. Marriage not only recognises that we're lonely individuals but that, in some profound and mysterious way, our world is concerned with communion.

This communion used to be considered the lesser of the two purposes for which marriage existed, procreation being primary. Then in 1930 and 1958, the Lambeth Conference recognised that loving communion and procreation were of equal importance and this opened the way for the churches to accept and justify the use of artificial contraception. Despite the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on contraception, Vatican II said that the generation of children 'does not make the other ends of marriage of less account' and this personalist approach is now taken for granted across all denominations.

The concept of marriage as a sacrament is difficult for many people to understand, not least because most of us have no idea what it means. A 'sacrament' in the Book of Common Prayer is said to be "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace" and in relation to marriage can be found in the teachings of the prophet Hosea. He said that marriage was a symbol of the covenant between God and Israel, the communion of the divine with the profane.

Hosea was married to Gomer but she left him for other men. He waited for her and finally took her back without recrimination. This secular drama is an image of God's tireless wait for Israel; it's also the image of God waiting for us after we have left him for other 'gods'.

Marriage, then, is a universal phenomenon as well as a religious symbol. Grace rests at the heart of it. For without grace there can be no forgiveness, only recrimination.

The moral and symbolic status of marriage often breaks down, however, and its passionate fullness is seldom realised in its entirety. But this is part of the human condition and shouldn't be used as a reason to denigrate the state. Just because we're feeble, selfish and inconstant individuals doesn't mean that the dream of one man and woman is wrong. Nor does it mean that we should become cynical about the hope that love can last a lifetime.

We frequently hurt each other and find ourselves fascinated by others, but if forgiveness and understanding is practiced than surely there is every chance and every reason for a marriage to last until death. And if it doesn't, God is gracious to us and will give us a second chance.

When a friend dies

I went to a friend's funeral last weekend, full of trepidation. Her life had been hard and her illness unjust. Not only had her ovarian cancer been wrongly diagnosed, but her body hadn't reacted well to chemotherapy and she suffered adverse affects to morphine. As a drug-company's guinea pig, her medication was wrongly administered and her flesh was eaten away so that skin grafts interrupted her treatment. In response, the drug company refused to permit her to use the drug and she had to rely on the hospital's lawyers to ensure she could continue with the treatment until the end. She was 45 years old.

Angela had a failing script from the start. Her troubles weren't easily explained by psychology alone. Circumstances seemed to pitch themselves up against her. Everything about Angela's life and death cried out 'injustice'. That was why I went to the funeral with trepidation. My fear was that Tim, the curate, would deflect the truth of Angela's life with sugarcoated platitudes.

And he did.

As her coffin progressed into the church to the tinkling sounds of wedding music, he called us to reflect on how 'lovely' this was. Angela had never married, but was now able to go up the aisle as she had always wished. In death she was married to God.

I was speechless.

According to Tim, faith is believing true facts about God. If reality points away from these facts, he takes reality and forces it back, like a weathercock, so that it points at the Unseen presence of God. This is how he ministers to his congregation. He encourages them to fill their minds with the scriptures so that when the going gets tough they can repeat them, like a mantra.

This isn't necessarily wrong. Self-help gurus urge us to develop a positive attitude, to control reality through the power of our minds. After all, our minds do seem to create and interpret much of the reality we experience.

For this reason alone I don't categorically condemn my friend's approach to faith. But there are times when reality is too great and too powerful to be manipulated. What then does the believer do? Praise God for Angela going up the aisle in her coffin, or turn to him in anger. There is nothing lovely in a wasted life.

Anger can be a form of love. It's love disappointed. God understands that; he has to if he is God. There are injustices that can't be explained, pain that can't be tolerated, cruelty and incomprehension that stretch beyond mere human brutality.

It's up to the Church to help us. Not with platitudes but with honesty; not with condescension but with shared pained.

The Priest who gave the address at Angela's funeral had ministered to her in the hospice, and had been with her when she died. He spoke to us of her struggle, of the God she fought and tried to love. He knew that faith wasn't easy. His message was this: God doesn't need to be defended.

Questions about God

Life, the Universe and everything

Does God exist? I say, 'Yes'; some of my students say, 'No'. Voltaire decided we'd have to invent him if he didn't, while Nietzsche wrote that God was dead but 'there will be caves, for ages yet, in which his shadow will be shown.'

The problem is, we want a definitive answer. Our whole sense of who we are and what we're doing here depends on it. So how do we decide?

The word 'God' is comprehensible (we all have an idea of what it means) but a spaceless, timeless being eludes us. We can't mount an expedition to search for him and we can't build a scientific lab to detect him. So, we're left with the logical games of philosophy and the stories of those who claim to have experienced him.

And that isn't such a bad place to end up. Human reason is a magnificent thing and if, by logical deduction, it can demonstrate the high probability of there being a God, we've achieved something.

Of course, we shouldn't be surprised if philosophers have problems offering a watertight 'proof' for God's existence. After all, my A-level students can't even prove the continued existence of a pen while their eyes are shut.

Still, rational arguments alone have never convinced anyone. I've yet to see a student jump up and say, 'I was wrong' on learning that the word 'God' necessitates his existence. And while conversion stories maybe self-validating to the person who had them, they can't be the basis of another person's faith. Until we 'bump into God' ourselves, we will probably remain agnostic.

All the same, the classical arguments for God's existence are important. Like a car, they can bring you to the sea front. Naturally, to know the sea, you have to jump into it. But, you can't jump into the sea if you live hundreds of miles away. You need to get there in the first place.

In the same way, the arguments can bring a person to the place where they're ready to make the great leap of faith. They can also deepen a believer's trust.

I believe in God because of personal experience, but I believe the experience to be veridical because I can offer rational arguments in favour of God existing. I can't believe what I know to be untrue and I can't love what I believe to be unreal. Arguments never gave me a faith but they certainly help me keep it.

There are many arguments for the existence of God and all can be questioned. They range from design to causation, from morality to experience, from the definition of the word God to the question of time. Perhaps the easiest to grasp is the argument from causation.

A version of it featured in Father Copleston's famous radio debate with Bertrand Russell in 1946. It goes like this: everything is caused by something else. Nothing comes about on its own. I exist because of my parents, they exist because of their parents, and they exist because of their parents. But how far back do we go? To the one-cell creatures that existed in the primeval soup? Perhaps, but we can still ask where they came from. Even the Big Bang isn't sufficient an answer because we can ask, 'what caused the Big Bang'? In fact, if we're not careful we can go back and back forever. Logic demands we end the regress somewhere – and by logic I mean basic common sense. The problem is where do we stop?

We have to be sensible about this. We need to propose something that causes everything else to exist but is itself caused by nothing; otherwise we can ask, 'what caused it?' This is why the uncaused-cause can't be the physical universe itself (as some would have it) because we know that came into existence at time zero when the 'big bang' happened.

The idea of a cause that is uncaused is bizarre. It would be very different to everything else existing. It would be eternal, never coming into existence and never going out of it. It would be external to our world. A theist, of course, calls this thing 'God'.

You might want to stop me here and say 'wait a sec, that isn't proof for God' and I'd agree. It isn't, not a definitive-never-to-be-questioned proof. But it's a good argument for proposing that something caused the universe to exist. If

might not give you God as a believer knows him, but it gets you quite close; at the very least it gives you a force powerful enough to create. And if our reason alone can get us that far, then we have achieved a lot.

What gender is God?

What is God? We should ask this question more often than we do. Our ideas of science, geography, history and art have advanced over the centuries, but our ideas of God get stuck way back in the past. That's why I found the article on God's gender last Saturday so interesting.

Any question concerning the transcendent is going to be difficult and complex, so let's think logically about this and begin with a definition.

According to my Oxford dictionary, God is "the creator and ruler of the universe, the Supreme Being." According to the philosophers, he is 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived', in other words 'God' refers to the greatest thing we can imagine.

I can think of power, knowledge, goodness, and existence through my every day experience. The greatest type of power I can imagine, however, would be absolute power (omnipotence); the greatest kind of knowledge, absolute knowledge (omniscience); the greatest kind of goodness, absolute goodness (omnibenevolence); the greatest kind of presence, absolute presence, that is being everywhere at the same time (omnipresence); and the greatest type of existence is an existence that is eternal without beginning or end.

If such a being were to exist, it would differ from the created order entirely. For one thing, it wouldn't have a body.

Think about it. How is God going to be present everywhere (and he must by definition) if he is limited by a spatial body? Is he so huge his big toe is on the earth, his little finger by the sun and his head in some distant galaxy? And how is he going to hear the prayers of every thing living with

only two ears, and see every event occurring at once with only two eyes? To multiply entities doesn't solve the problem. With a million eyes, God still wouldn't be able to see everything at once.

If this being has no physical body it stands to reason that it has no gender. Gender belongs to the created order. To ask whether God is male or female is to ask the wrong question. Just as to ask whether God has two eyes or twenty is to be knocking on the wrong door.

My year seven classes at College are grappling with this problem at present and have come to realise that the best way to conceive of God is as a force. Rather like gravity, we can't see him but his effects are all about us. I can't bring an object called gravity into the classroom, but I can drop a pen for them to witness its power. In the same way I can't bring an object called God before an atheist, but I can find evidence of his effects.

Of course, every analogy falls apart if pushed too far. Gravity isn't personal as theists claim God to be, and it most certainly isn't creative. Still, it's a useful tool in helping us to understand what God could be.

As Aquinas said, God isn't a noun (an object) but a verb (an action, a force). He isn't an object living in a place called heaven, but rather a pulsating force all about us. This 'Existing' is, at one and the same time with me as I write this article and with the most distance stars in corners of the universe.

It's difficult to talk about God in these terms – it pushes the limits of our understanding to breaking point. That's why we employ symbols and metaphors to help us.

'God is a fortress' means that God is a strong protective force within which I can find safety. 'God is a rock' means that he is strong and unchanging. 'God is father' means he cares, protects, disciplines and guides me like a father. To say 'God is mother' is to say that she is gentle, caring, loving; the being that created me and will fight for me.

Now, the contentious point is this – is God more 'male' in his personality than 'female'? Are we right to pray "Our Father," rather than "Our Mother"?

The tendency to call God 'he' is rooted in the patriarchal societies, which wrote the Bible. The very fact that Jesus (God incarnate for the Christians) was male, doesn't argue for God's maleness, merely for the sociological sense of God coming in the form of a man in a society that didn't permit women to study or give witness in a court of Law.

The male gender expresses authority and power; and God has absolute authority and power. But to say God doesn't possess the female attributes of tenderness and affection is to deny something about the nature of God. Moreover, to say a man can't be tender is to rid him of his humanity, and to say a woman can't be powerful is to rid her of her humanity.

To talk about God as 'he' or 'she' is to limit God where God shouldn't be limited – the problem is, we have no other way of speaking. As far as I'm concerned, I have little difficulty either way. I'll continue to use the male pronoun out of habit. But I don't do so believing God is male.

Was Jesus a liar?

Christianity would be a reasonable faith were it not for Jesus. It would be pragmatic, utilitarian, and a commendable way to live. Regrettably, however, it breathes a doctrine that is scandalous and objectionable.

It claims that a first-century preacher was fully God and fully human, an idea that would make him a psychopath were it untrue. Buddha denied divinity and Muhammad was zealous in his claim to be only a man. But Jesus was different and because of this we have to consider him closely.

Potentially, Jesus was one of the most dangerous and most pernicious human beings ever to live because, thanks to his claims not only his immediate followers but millions since have suffered violent and undeserved deaths.

The question of Jesus' divinity is central to any talk about the faith. Christians haven't died for good ethics or a sensible religion. They've died for a man-God. The on-going slaughter by the Caesars is infamous, but more Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than at any other time in history.

Their unshakeable belief that God became human has fascinated some of the greatest thinkers and it has changed the world. So, to decide the truth of the Incarnation, we need to consider the alternatives.

Perhaps Jesus wasn't God and he knew as much: in other words, he was a liar. Or he was deluded in believing himself God and was thus a lunatic. Or Jesus wasn't God and never claimed he was; his followers and the writers of the New Testament created the myth of his divinity.

The problem with Jesus being a liar is this: a man claims to be God while knowing he is not, isn't a good man. Yet in Jesus' life we encounter love and compassion. We also encounter someone who had no motive for lying. He was a Jew and knew that, of all the peoples living at the time the Jews were the least likely to worship a man. He knew death was the punishment for blasphemy, and he died.

Of course, he could have sincerely believed in his divinity but been mistaken. This makes him untrustworthy but it doesn't make him bad. The 'divinity complex' is a recognised form of psychopathology, but the traits include egotism, narcissism, and an inability to relate to others. Jesus has the wrong psychological profile.

Few people hold to Jesus being a liar or a lunatic. It's more popular to argue that his divinity is a myth created by his followers. The inherent problem with this position, however, is the same as with Jesus himself: the disciples didn't have the right profile. And they didn't have a motive. A man may die for many things, but he seldom dies for a lie he has fabricated.

What of the New Testament texts? Hero-worship tends to divinise the hero and for many this is the most reasonable explanation. Without having the space here to analyse this argument in depth, let me highlight a few important considerations.

First, the manuscripts are in pretty good condition, compared with other ancient documents. We have 500 copies of New Testaments texts earlier than 500AD (or CE) while for the Iliad (the most reliable ancient text), there are only 50 copies that date from 500 years after its creation. Likewise Tacitus' Annals: we have only one late manuscript yet it's treated as authentic history. The problem with the New Testament isn't historical reliability but its contents. Miracles and radical claims about life don't sit well with us.

Secondly, for the Jesus-myth to have been created, it's generally accepted that at least two or three generations would have had to pass between the original eyewitnesses of the historical Jesus and the inventors of the myth. This means, most of the texts would have to have been written after 150 AD (CE). But no one denies the first century dating of virtually all the New Testament especially the letters of St Paul.

Thirdly, the Gospels aren't written in the style of myths. You need only to read the Greek myths or apocalyptic literature to see the difference.

People will continue to reject Jesus' divinity for numerous reasons. Jesus makes claims on our lives and few of us are willing to renounce our independence. Our liberal age is unhappy with exclusivist claims and Jesus' claims to divinity tend to exclude everyone else. In the end, however, many of my atheist friends agree with G.K. Chesterton who wrote, 'The only good argument against Christianity is Christians.'

The problem of talking about God

The greatest challenge facing religion today is not the fundamentalist threat to social stability, but an understanding of religious language that gives rise to fundamentalism. The fundamentalist believes he can speak truthfully about God. The problem is, he can't.

In our everyday lives we're uncritical users of language. We utilize words to express ideas, to refer to things in the world

and to give meaning to our thoughts. Our focus isn't on the means of communication but on what is being communicated. As long as we're working grammar correctly and using words from the dictionary, than we hope we're saying something true (unless we're consciously lying, of course).

But this isn't necessary the case. Wittgenstein, the 20th century philosopher said that language bewitches us. Rather than opening up universal truths, it can confuse matters. This is because language has developed over time through common usage; it's social and interactive.

Take the sentence: "I have a body". This implies that I'm composed of two parts: the 'I' that does the possessing and the 'body' that is possessed. This supports the theory of the soul. The body decays on death but the 'I' is immortal. But just because we talk as if we were made up of two substances doesn't mean that we are, and developments in neural science tend to support this conclusion.

The danger with religious language is the assumption that we can talk uncritically of God; that I can speak about him in the same way as I can speak about my neighbour. There are certain rules of usage, of course. I can't say that God has big ears or that he was in a bad mood last night. And when I say 'he' I am following social convention.

Still, when I say 'God is good' I may have in mind an extended version of friends who have been good to me. And when I read that 'God is a jealous God' I might imagine something akin to my own possessiveness.

Yet logically this can't be the case. I'm comparing two different forms of reality; one that is material and one that is immaterial. To assume that human language, created to work within a universe of space and time, is able to talk about something that dwells beyond such constraints is foolish. If physics struggles to discuss phenomena as bizarre as quarks and black holes, how much more do the religions labour to discuss God?

God isn't an object. Objects belong to space and time. Whatever God is, Aquinas is probably right to say he is more like a verb than a noun, 'being' rather than 'a being'. Here we

hit the limits of human understanding. And therein dwells the problem.

Medieval thinkers concluded that anything said of God was untrue. The only thing we could say for certain was that "God is not". He isn't evil, he isn't an object and he isn't male or female. Pushed to the limits, we'd have to say that God doesn't exist because the nature of his existence is totally unlike our own and wholly incomprehensible.

These very real and pertinent questions are aggravated by a tendency within certain branches of Judaism, Islam and Christianity to argue for the unerring nature of scripture.

Scripture, by the very fact of being written, is limited. It can never be a full and total revelation.

The Fundamentalist argues that God has revealed himself from above; that he's told the world the truth about reality and the place of humanity within it; he's spoken definitively about his own nature and how we're to live in relation to it.

But the problem remains: how does a Reality outside space and time communicate truths about itself to creatures within space and time? After all, humans are, by definition, confined and limited in their intelligence. To argue that God is all-powerful and can do anything is to miss the point. By our very nature we're incapable of knowing the totality of God. What we know is an approximation. And approximations, wrongly understood, come very close to being falsehoods.

If revelation occurs at all, it's more likely to be a two-way process between a God seeking to make himself known and mankind seeking to understand.

If this is so, Scripture becomes historical and cultural, in much the same way as language. As we seek to understand, we err in our understanding; and as God seeks to be known, he's limited by how we can know him. Truths can be discovered, but they can also be lost or never found at all.

If religious practitioners were educated into the problem of language, they'd read the scriptures with new eyes. They wouldn't find there the call to Exclusivism, the condemnation of other faiths or a God that peddles their own cultural and social interests. God wouldn't be so easily abused.

God, the mother

It seems to me that we forget the motherhood of God too easily. The alpha-male mentality seems to be part of our identity as primates and for that reason I doubt we'll ever rid ourselves of the patriarch. Yet we need the mother as much as we need the father.

Authority and power go hand in hand, but power is a frequently misunderstood. How many leaders have associated it with absolute control? How many fathers have associated it with physical punishment and emotional domination?

The psychologists argue that children who have experienced patriarchal abuse will later project that abuse onto God. They will create images of a tyrannical Lord and either fear him or rebel against him.

Freud, more than many Christians realise, was correct in highlighting the interplay between the God-concept and the Father-concept. For this reason the church must address the motherhood of God more openly.

This isn't devotion to the Virgin. It's helping people understand that God is as much mother as father, as much love as authority, as much adoring as seriously disciplining.

For many people, the only experience of love they've ever known has come from their mother. Staring into the eyes of the being that feeds them, babies are enveloped in intimacy and tenderness. They receive love innocently as if it were the only thing existing. They receive security and learn to rest in it. They receive succour and learn to accept it as rightfully theirs.

This is why the story of the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment is so moving. How often does a child believe in the magic of his mother's touch?

I was convinced that nothing could harm me if I slept in my mother's bed and that her handkerchief was sufficient to heal me while I was at boarding school. Such superstition was rooted in a truth: that my mother would come from the ends of the earth to help me. As is my mother, so much more is God.

Sadly, however, the world is imperfect. Some mothers are poor mothers and some fathers, are poor fathers. Many

children learn from an early age to defend themselves against the world. They acquire a dog-like submission or grow into rebels who pretend to fear no one while fearing everything. Either way, their mistrust of the universe becomes a mistrust of God.

The hells we create are hells without love. Where there is love, there is no hell. Ask any close family or successful marriage. Our emotional hells are hells because we can't and won't allow love to enter. Our social hells are hells because we care too little and want too much.

I believe there will be hell in the next life, not the prison of a cruel God, but the empty souls of those who spurn love.

If God is everywhere, he's also in hell. But his presence there makes it more hellish than we can ever imagine. Hell is where those who can't love try to hide from it. It's the locked bedroom of the angry child or the person who, wanting love more desperately than anyone else, grinds it under foot.

Yet, just as the patient mother waits for her child to come downstairs, so God waits for us. And just as the mother cautiously opens the child's bedroom door, so God opens the door into our angry hearts.

There's no dungeon filthy enough to stop a mother rescuing her child; and no place dangerous enough to impede her courage. In the same way, there's no depth God won't go to bring back the lost. Just as few can resist such ardent love, so few will be hell.

A story

The Angel and the Soldier

"Go out through all the world," God said to his angels, "and bring me the most precious thing you can find."

With a whish of their mighty wings, the angels flew down from Heaven into the deeper reaches of the universe. Past galaxies of burning stars they rushed, until far below they saw a blue planet turning slowly in its orbit. Down and down they whirled, a whispering arrow of light, piercing through the outer canopies of the earth's atmosphere and spiralling fast into its heavy air. There the angels passed their days searching for the most precious thing existing.

After many weeks, the angels assembled once more in the Meeting House of Heaven. Enthroned before a sea of burnished gold, God greeted them, and called each angel to present its chosen object.

"I have brought a flower that lay hidden in the undergrowth of the Amazon," said the angel Cathbad. "No man has ever seen it, and so small and delicate is it, that only the ants are acquainted with its beauty. But I believe there is no flower in the world so magnificently created."

God took the flower. "Indeed," he murmured. "I too consider it exquisite."

Nessa, an angel of enormous size stepped forward. "I bring you the embryo of a whale. That such a creature could come from this delicate collection of cells is a marvel that can only be considered precious."

God took the embryo. "Life is precious indeed," he agreed.

"I bring you the sun beam at dawn, which colours the skies. People marvel at the wonder and are blessed by its beauty."

God thanked the tall angel that stood before him. He laid the beam above his throne, and its gentle hues gladdened the hearts of those present.

"I bring you a butterfly," murmured the angel Idyll. "Her wings are like tissues dipped in rainbow dye but they carry her many miles across the land. Though she is small she is mighty, and to me she is most precious."

God held the fluttering butterfly in the palm of his hand. "She is a creature of heaven."

All day and all night the angels came before God bringing the marvels of his creation. The storms at sea, the fires of the volcano, an autumn leaf as it spirals down on the breath of a breeze. And when dawn arrived God clapped his hands.

"You have chosen well," he said. "For creation is a precious thing and it is given as a blessing to all. But we are one angel short. Tarpeta has yet to arrive."

At his words, the sunlight doors of the Meeting House swung open and Tarpeta entered, carrying on her arm the dishevelled body of a soldier.

The angels held back in astonishment.

"Forgive me O Mighty One," she said. "I have travelled the earth in search of the most precious thing I could find, far and wide, from the lowest depths to the highest mountains. I marvelled at the beauty of the flowers I saw, their scent and their colours. The sea inspired me and I flew with ease on the arm of the winds. I heard songs sung by children and stories told by sages, and yet for all the wonders around me I knew that there must be something more precious yet. And then O Lord, I happened to pass a battlefield. I had never seen such destruction. Your trees were torn from the ground, the grass was all gone and the birds lay slaughtered in the mud. Death was all I could see. Bodies of men strew the ditches and the liquid earth was red with their blood. I blocked my ears to the moaning and groaning, and turned my eyes away from the horror. I heard the beat of the wings of the Angel of Death, and against the darkening sky I could see his bat-like shadow. I wanted to flee. But then I noticed a soldier below me. Leaning against the wall of a trench, he sat with his head bowed forward. In his hands he clutched the helmet of a dead friend. Tenderly I sat beside him and leaned my head against his weary shoulder. He did not feel me nor did he know I was there, but tears fell from his eyes, and together we wept. So I took this man in my arms and through the great Void I brought him here that he might stand before you O God. For, in all the earth I have found nothing more precious than a soul in need of rest."

Raising himself up, God crossed the sea of burnished gold and held the weary soldier to his breast.

"You have chosen well," he said. "The birds and flowers, the winds and the sunsets are only the trappings of beauty. But in the tears of a man whose heart aches for peace, is the sigh of my eternal hope."

Shoulder to shoulder, God led the soldier out through the sunlight gates of the Meeting House into the vastness of his heaven. And there in place where the sun never sets they shared their dreams of life.