



Transcripts

Bishop Michael Marshall's Bible Studies

from a series of short lunchtime praise and study sessions, designed to help lead us to silent contemplative prayer, which took place between the 6th June 2011 and the 25th July 2011 at St Stephen Walbrook

**'LIFE-CHANGING ENCOUNTERS
WITH THE RISEN CHRIST'**

**Bible Studies with a Difference
(traditionally known as 'Lectio Divina')**

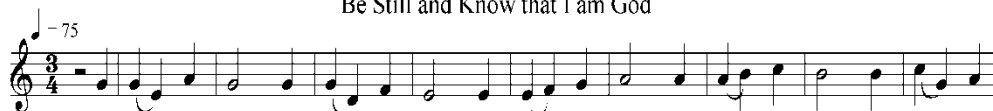
with **Bishop Michael Marshall, The Rev'd Soon Han Choi & The Rev'd Roger Hoath**

Scripture

We do not come to the scriptures primarily for information about God, but rather, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who first inspired the Scriptures, we seek a personal encounter with God, through Jesus the living Word of God, who by the same Holy Spirit speaks to us through the written words of Scripture. 'The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.'
(N.I.V. 2 Corinthians 3:6)

Praise & Praise

Be Still and Know that I am God



1. Be still and know that I am God Be still and know that I am God Be still and
2. In Thee O Lord I put my trust; In Thee O Lord, I put my trust; In Thee O



know that I am God
Lord I put my trust.

The Eight Bible Studies at St Stephen Walbrook

'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'

MONDAY, 6TH JUNE 2011	From Oppression to Freedom	(John 11 : 38-44)
MONDAY, 13TH JUNE 2011	From Despair to Hope	(Luke 24: 25-35)
MONDAY, 20TH JUNE 2011	From Looking to Seeing	(Matthew 28: 1-9)
MONDAY, 27TH JUNE 2011	From Sensuality to Intimacy	(John 20:11-18)
MONDAY, 4TH JULY 2011	From Fear to Faith	(John 20:19-22)
MONDAY, 11TH JULY 2011	From Information to Transformation	(John 20:24-29)
MONDAY, 18TH JULY 2011	From Failure to Forgiveness	(John 21:4-12 & 15-17)
MONDAY 25TH JULY 2011	From Religion to Faith	(Matthew 14. 23 –33)



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Introductory Session

Bible Passage

1. (John 11: 38 - 44)

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

1. From Oppression to Freedom;

Lazarus

(John 11: 38-44)

'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'

Welcome to the first of these Monday lunch-time Bible Studies throughout June and July – 'Bible Studies with a Difference.'

INTRODUCTION Well, here's a starter for ten question? Do you believe in life **after** death? Or would you prefer that ear-catching sound-bite by Oxfam in which they said, 'We believe in life **before** death?' In one sense, actually, both of them are right, but it all depends what you mean by death.

So let's start by reflecting on the passage of scripture we've just heard read – the story in St. John's Gospel of the **'Raising of Lazarus.'** There's practical, sensible old Martha, who I like to call the patron saint of common sense, saying exactly what I suspect most sensible, practical down-to-earth people would say, when Jesus **'came to the tomb'** and told the mourners to **take away the stone** from the entrance to the tomb, where the dead body of her brother, Lazarus had been for four days. But Jesus refuses to be put off.

'Martha, did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?'

And what is this **'glory of God'** of which Jesus speaks?

'The glory of God,' said Irenaeus, one of the early Fathers of the Church, 'is a human being fully alive.'

So now do you see what Jesus is saying? 'Martha, if you really believe and trust in me, you will see your brother not just come back to life, resuscitated – but fully alive as he has not yet been – fully alive with that "new life, that enriched quality of life," which I, Jesus embody and exemplify. I've come to this place of death – this world –where everybody is only half alive – to show you God's way of being truly human and fully alive and to help you to get a life – a life worth living.'

As Jesus said in that key text which is the text for this whole series of Bible studies : 'I've come that you might have life and have it abundantly.' And it's that transforming power of God to bring new life out of death and decay that we shall be exploring together in this series of Bible studies.

Abundant life –is a quality of life which is only incidentally length of life – an enriched life, because it is a life in relationship: abundant life – life in relationship with God, the source of all life. A quality of love and life **this** side of the tomb (death in that sense – so Oxfam was right in that sense) – a quality of life that is stronger than the death of the tomb, precisely because it is rooted and grounded in the life of God himself – the source of all life.

So by eternal life, Jesus is not referring primarily to what happens **after** the grave – death in that sense. Rather, it is the new life, in the here and now that Jesus was recalling Lazarus to. So, to use a rather vulgar analogy: this abundant, so-called 'eternal life' is not only 'pie in the sky when you die,' so much as 'steak on your plate while you wait,' and furthermore, life in the here and now.'

'JESUS CRIED WITH A LOUD VOICE, "LAZARUS, COME OUT.'" So here is Christ calling Lazarus, as he is calling you and me, to **'come out'** from the tomb of our self-made image – to come out from the isolation of individualism which is the curse of our age: get a life - a life in relationship with others and with God.

And now it's time to read the passage not so much analytically with the mind, but to begin to **see through** this passage of scripture with the eyes of the heart – with the eyes of a more contemplative reading of scripture: reading between the lines if you like, and letting God's living word – Jesus, the Word of Life, by the same Holy Spirit, who first inspired the **written** words of scripture, - letting him speak his **living** word in the here and now personally to you and me - through the words of scripture. The Holy Spirit as Jesus promised 'will take his words and re-present them to us' – in the present, almost existentially.

For are we not all in some sense 'Lazarus'? Are there not parts in each one of us, that are dead, caught up, nurtured by what I want to call a 'culture of death'? You see, from God's perspective we are all only half alive; half deaf, half lame, half blind? And Jesus comes to call us out and to let go of (or 'to die to,' as St. Paul would say) that self which has been culturally conditioned by our parents and well-meaning mentors with all the false expectations imposed upon us or by our illusory selves – yes, conditioned, culturally, politically, ideologically, yes, and even by religion. So Christ fulfilled in his first sermon the words of the Prophet, that he was anointed to bring good news: to make 'the dumb to speak; the deaf to hear; the blind to see and the lame to walk' – becoming ever more fully alive as we are drawn, through prayer and life in Christ and through Jesus, into a relationship with his Father and ours – the source and root of eternal, abundant and therefore unending life.

And you know sometimes it takes a real disaster to bring us – like the 'Prodigal Son' to ourselves – our true selves. Sometimes, it isn't until we can say as we hit rock bottom – 'I'm finished' – it isn't until then, that God can begin the new work in us: not sometimes until we **breakdown** that God can eventually **break through** - 'finished' in the sense that we've finally thrown in the towel and in that sense 'died.' So in one sense, as I said at the beginning, I believe only in new life after the false self and life has died in that sense.

'THE DEAD MAN CAME OUT, HIS HANDS AND FEET BOUND WITH STRIPS OF CLOTH, AND HIS FACE WRAPPED IN A CLOTH. JESUS SAID, "UNBIND HIM AND LET HIM GO."'

You see sin, is not necessarily bad or evil. Rather, it represents a means that we have turned into an end, so that we end up in a cul-de-sac, missing the point of it all. It's often even those quite good things that hook us and rob of us of our freedom to be who we truly are, - inhibiting our freedom to be the sons and daughters of God, fully alive in Him. Money, drink, sex, ambition – all intended as God-given means of relating to others and being used for good ends – it's these that become ends in themselves. They rob us of freedom to live this abundant, enriched life. 'Bury the Chains' was the title of a book on the abolition of slavery. The psalmist testifies that 'the Lord looses those that are bound,' (Psalm 146: 7) while Paul tells the Christians in Corinth – 'I will not be enslaved by anything.' (1 Corinthians 6: 2) We need to bury the chains and die to all that binds us, a bit like that 'Rich Young Ruler' in the New Testament who ended up possessed by his possessions, longing all his life to belong, but ending up belonging to his belongings.

Paul did **not** say, 'Money is the root of all evil.' (He was far too good a business man for that!) No! He said that 'the **love** of money is the root of all evil.' Money is not there to be loved. **People** are there to be loved and money is one of many wonderful means of expressing our love for others and for God. Created to use things and love people, we've ended up using and abusing people and loving things. As though we've everything to live with and nothing to live for. Yes, we're seriously in danger of missing the point of it all.

So Jesus calls us out of those tombs of our own making, from the darkness to the light – from illusion to reality, calling us to let go of that false synthetic, DIY self, - culturally conditioned self - and to allow God to draw us out from being all wrapped up in ourselves, finally transforming us into the person he created

us to be. As the Bishop of London quoted from St. Catherine of Siena at the Royal Wedding: 'Become the person you were created to be, and you could set the world on fire.'

So we see Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of Ezekiel in the Old Testament.

'Thus says the Lord God, "I am going to open your tombs and raise you up from your tombs, O my people, I will put my Spirit in you and you shall live.'" (Ezekiel 37: 12, 14)

This is what Jesus wants for each one of us today. To each of us, he says : 'Take away the stone you are entombed and hiding behind, and come out: come out from behind those barricades; take off the mask you are hiding behind, and those wrappings binding you - all wrapped up in yourself - and open your mind and heart to the power of my life-giving Holy Spirit . And then as I promised Martha, you will see the glory of God as a person fully alive and free.'

And 'this resurrection,' says Jean Vanier, 'is a process that begins every morning, every day, as we are becoming ever more fully alive so that in turn we may give life to others.'

Bible Passage

2. (Luke 24; 25-35)

Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

2. From Despair to Hope:

Road to Emmaus

(Luke 24: 25-35)

'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'

Welcome to the second of these eight Monday Lunch-time Bible Studies throughout June and July – 'Bible Studies with a Difference.'

So, here again, that story of the appearing of the Risen Christ on the first Easter Sunday evening to those two disillusioned and despairing disciples – Cleopas and his friend – as they set out to get away from all the tragic events of the past few days in Jerusalem – the Crucifixion of Jesus. They had had enough – all their hopes crushed – and so they set out to escape to their little bolthole, in a little village, Emmaus, a few miles away from Jerusalem, the city of conflict.

Their Emmaus wherever it was, was their place of escape, when life had become unbearable and just too much – in their case a country cottage possibly. What is my Emmaus or yours – the place or things we run to for escape from conflict? Booze or binge drinking; drugs, surfing the internet or even a make-belief religion of sorts – perhaps, the most subtle escape device of all.

But whatever or wherever it is – we cannot escape the living God – that 'Hound of Heaven.' As the psalmist says, 'If I climb up to heaven, thou art there: if I go down to hell thou art there also.' For this Jesus, went out of his way, as love is always willing to do, and came all the way from heaven to earth and hell and back again to meet **us** at our point of need.

And so Jesus pulls alongside Cleopas and his friend running away from it all, obsessively talking over and over again the tragic details, as we all do at times of tragedy and bereavement – **'talking and discussing together,'** as it says. It was right there, that Jesus himself 'drew near and went with them.' Jesus met them, **'at their point of need,'** as he comes to meet us at our point of need – wherever we are, just as we are, and even if we're going in the wrong direction.

Initially, Jesus has come to listen. 'What are you talking about? He asks – 'what is on your heart? But, we are told, **'they stood still looking sad.'** Yes, we always begin to look sad if we stand still on the journey of life or the spiritual journey. It's when we stand still and get stuck in any relationship – whether marriage, friendship or whatever – that the glow fades and the relationship withers – we smile less and laugh less, for however far we've travelled on the journey of life or developed in our relationship with another or indeed in our spiritual journey with God, we must not stand still, let alone look back, otherwise we atrophy. You just can't pin this Jesus down and however far you've travelled in love and life, Jesus, as our story says, always wants to go further and deeper. Remember and recall our personal stories, pains and joys alike from the past – yes; but we must never allow ourselves to become the prisoners of our stories, imprisoned in our past.

But Cleopas blurts out to Jesus as they stood still. **'We had hoped.'** No, never! Hope must always point to God's future for us, full of surprises.

And so it all comes tumbling out as they pour out their hearts to Jesus, whom they have not recognized, precisely because they are so wrapped up in themselves – **wrapped up** in **their** story, rather than being **caught up** in the mega story of death and Resurrection embodied in Jesus and the Risen Body of Christ.

'Pour out your hearts before him,' says the psalmist. That is where true prayer can begin, pouring it all out to this Jesus, our Risen Lord – before whom, as the prayer says 'all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden' – coming to him, **just as we are**, telling it **just as it is**, and not dressing it up in words that we think we ought to say. For if we are willing to tell it all just as it is, then he can take it and turn it around to become what he alone can make it become. Frederick Buechner says, 'The only trouble with the Good news is that you generally have to find it all among the bad news.' Yes, God can do with our disasters what he did with the bad news of crucifixion and death – he can bring greater good out of evil, new life out of death and defeat, vindicating that claim of St. Paul that in the end **all** things work together for good for those who trust in the God of Resurrection.

But the turning point in this travelogue comes, as in prayer, when **we** stop talking and let Jesus do the talking – opening ourselves to God's **living** Word, Jesus, the Word of Life and Hope and Good news, right in the midst of the despair and bad news.

And so Jesus rolls out the road map of his destiny and ours, pointing out the road and the Way to the heart of God and his glorified new life, - a road and a way that necessarily passes right through the darkness and pain of the world to the light and glory of God. But notice right through it - neither round it or over it– such as the escapist counsels of the world would suggest: yes, **right through** it, but always with Jesus our companion in and through the midst, the mess and the mystery of it all.

So, '**Was it not necessary,**' says Jesus, '**that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?**' And so Jesus begins his Bible Master Class. '**Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.**'

He did it for them and he will and still does it for his church, for you and me. For, Jesus is saying, 'the scriptures only make ultimate sense when they point beyond their literal meaning and point, by the same Holy Spirit who first inspired them, to Jesus, the Word made flesh, God's living Word addressed to His Church, to you and me now – right where we are, in the midst of it all, in the mess of it all, in the mystery of it all. 'For the letter kills,' as St. Paul says, 'but the Spirit gives life.'

And then three things happened to them when they allowed Jesus to get his word in edge ways through Word and Sacrament to reveal a little more of his true self to them.

FIRST, we read, 'their eyes were opened and they recognized him.' They saw and could know a little more of who Jesus really is – the man **behind** the message – in what was to be an ever-deepening relationship of faith and trust in Jesus, who shows us God's way of being truly human and fully alive. Later, as they reflected on their experience of that Bible Study with Jesus, they said: 'Did not our hearts burn within us, as he opened to us the Scriptures?' In such a Bible study it's as though the words spring off the page, italicised, as they resonate within the depths of our being with our inner experiences of truth, beauty and goodness. 'Yes, yes that's it – not a different world (that **would** be escapism) but the same old world, but from a different perspective – new life through the death of the old.

SECONDLY, those two despairing disciples and escapists turned around, and returned back to the city to face the conflict as apostles of good news – the good news that the tomb of death, even right in the here-and-now is the womb of new life: how the light of resurrection hope, shines in the darkness of despair and the darkness cannot overwhelm it, and how when we are finished, God can and does make a new beginning.

So we read, '**they arose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem,**' – from the place of escape, weakness and defeat, to face the conflict of the city with a new inner strength. It happened to them and

it can happen to us – daily, whenever and wherever we work or live – as the Risen Christ meets us at our point of need.

THIRDLY AND FINALLY, we read that when they returned, ‘they found the other eleven gathered together’, doing what the church should always be doing – celebrating and testifying to the resurrection of Jesus, for as Roger Schultz said, ‘Christians are a resurrection people and alleluia is our song.’ And then Luke continues, the disciples’ ‘told what had happened to them on the road and how Jesus had made himself known to them.’ In a word, they witnessed to Jesus and told their story, or as the psalmist says: ‘I will tell you what the Lord has done for my soul.’

SPA spells out the outline of a repeated process: From Scripture to Prayer and from Prayer to Action. If our faith in the Risen Christ is central to our whole understanding of who we truly are, we don’t only talk about it, we walk the talk and act on it, for as we say, ‘actions speak louder than words,’ or as St. James says in his Epistle: ‘Be doers of the word and not hearers only.’

We pray and act as members – hands, feet, legs and tongues – of the Risen Body of Christ right here and now in this square mile of this great city – or wherever we live or work.

Bible Passage

3. (Matthew 28: 1 – 9)

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he* lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead,* and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.

3. From Looking to Seeing:

Women at the Tomb

(Matthew 28: 1-9)

'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'

In these eight Monday lunch-time Bible Studies together, we're studying and reflecting prayerfully on the written words of Scripture, so that the same Holy Spirit who first inspired the written words of Scripture, may lead us in prayer to an encounter with God's living Word – the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ - as we explore together that new way of life, experienced as enriched, eternal and abundant life. In such Bible Studies, we seek an understanding of Scripture which enlightens the mind, warms the heart and fires the will; as we move from scripture to prayer, and, as in turn, we move from prayer to action in every-day life.

And so today, in our Bible Study entitled – 'From Looking to Seeing' - we will reflect on a Resurrection appearance as related in St. Matthew's Gospel: the visit of the women to the empty tomb on the first Easter morning.

At the outset however, we need to acknowledge that the recorded details of that first Easter Sunday, as written up in the four gospel accounts vary very considerably - at times even to the point of contradiction in several details. (Mind you, I'm rather relieved that they don't all agree on every point of detail, for if they all told an identical story in every detail, surely that would indicate collusion – a cover up! It's their very diversity which authenticates their evidence as personal; the record of first hand witnesses – yes, the same event, but recorded from different perspectives.

Yet conversely in a few essential details, there is striking consensus and agreement. All four accounts agree that it was the women who were first to come to the empty tomb and to encounter the Risen Lord, rather than the men. 'Toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre.'

Secondly, and perhaps more strikingly, - not only was the tomb empty, but the huge stone at the entrance to the tomb, had already been rolled away.

So first, what about that empty tomb and the missing body, because if that were all there were to Easter Day, then neither you nor I would be sitting here in this or indeed any church, two thousand years later. Those first disciples and visitors to the empty tomb needed to be moved from looking for a disappearing Jesus to seeing and experiencing the real Risen Lord, personally and intimately – an experience which transformed their lives – and which – in the course of our spiritual journey, can and does transform your life and mine.

And so, those words of the angel; to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary: 'Do not be afraid, for I know you are looking for Jesus....He is not here....Go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee: there you will see him.' Stop looking here – go there to Galilee to see him.

My mother often used a phrase which is a common English saying. She used to say: 'I can't see for looking!' You see, the difficulty about looking for someone or something is that the fixed, preconceived or fixated idea of what you're looking for, can sometimes blind you to seeing what is really there - staring you in the face.

So, 'Go to Galilee' – you won't need to look very far there, for as the angel adds, there all his disciples who are looking for him will 'see him' – see him as he really is, in his new life – the God who is – rather

than the God of your imagination, whom you've always been looking for. Since the dawn of time, people have been looking for the wrong sort of God, a superstar or wonder worker or a blown-up version of superman! So little wonder that in all four accounts of the Resurrection, the disciples did not at first recognize Jesus – the Risen Lord.

He had changed! So he would, after all he'd been through. When I see people again, whom I haven't seen for many years and they say to me that I haven't changed a scrap, I always feel a bit like saying, 'I hope to God I have.' And so in our discipleship, as in any relationship of love, if that relationship is more than skin deep, both parties will change and be changed. Jesus had been through it – through life, through death, and out the other side, to the new life beyond the death of the old, - and now as unlike as a butterfly is to a caterpillar, before the chrysalis stage.

But why on earth Galilee? Luke gives us a vital clue, when in his account, that same angel at the tomb says to those first women visitors, "Remember how Jesus told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise." And they remembered his words.'

For, it was up north in Galilee at the outset of it all that Jesus had – three times - spelt it out in no uncertain terms that he must suffer and be crucified before he entered his glory. But Peter took Jesus aside, you remember, and began to rebuke him, saying that this could not possibly happen to Jesus, the Messiah, the man of power, - their would-be untouchable 'superstar'!

So if that's the sort of Jesus Christ Superstar you're looking for then you will never see him.

SO GO BACK TO GALILEE where it all began and make a new start – begin all over again and come to know this Jesus crucified and risen more clearly; loving him more dearly and following him more nearly, all the way back home into the heart of his Father and ours. For what the whole human race needs to know and to see is the Way to new life but through the death of the old in Jesus who is, the real authentic Jesus - the Way to true, abundant and eternal life, but right in the here-and-now. .

The spiritual journey back to God necessarily passes through the pain and suffering of the world – through death – to the greater life beyond where Jesus has gone ahead and prepared a place for us. Jesus didn't come back to life like Lazarus. No! Jesus leads the way through death to life beyond, - with Jesus, it's resurrection not resuscitation, and so with you and me.

So, true discipleship is always a journey, demanding that we are moved from our comfort zone, refusing to settle down in the familiar, constantly pressing on from the known to the unknown – and, all the while, as the angel said, 'Do not be afraid.'

Do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples just before his crucifixion? 'A little while and you will see me and again a little while and you will not see me, because I go to the Father.' On the spiritual journey of discipleship and faith, it's as though, 'now you see him, now you don't.' In those forty days between the Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus kept appearing and disappearing. Why? Because they must not be deluded into believing that they had got Jesus pinned down or all buttoned up in their vocabulary and their images. Neither must we. They needed to learn as we need to learn that, as St. Paul says, 'We walk by faith and not by sight.' Sometimes, in our times of prayer in the silence, beyond words and images, we feel the Risen Christ to be very present, while at other times we are only aware of his seeming absence. It's at those times that Christ is moving us onward and forward in faith, demanding that we let go of (or die to) our childish and immature images and projections of him in our spiritual exploration – until at last we see him face to face and know him as he truly is – knowing, as we are known. Such is the experience of true prayer and worship.

As they were setting out we read, they took hold of the feet of Jesus and worshipped him. Yes, it is in those times of silent faithful prayer, resting in God, that our relationship corporately and personally changes and deepens, changed by true love. For, as Andrew Lloyd Webber says in the musical 'Aspects of Love' – 'Love changes everything.' So letting go of what lies behind, let's press forward to take hold of him (as those disciples did) who first took hold of us – at our Galilee in baptism by water and the Spirit, where it all began - a beginning, which knows no end. 'We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.' (Eliot)

Bible Passage

4. (John 20: 11-18)

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (Which means "Teacher"). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

4. From Sensuality to Intimacy:

Mary Magdalene

(John 20:11-18)

'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'

Today, in our Bible Study entitled – ***From sensuality to Intimacy*** – we will reflect on the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Lord, outside the empty tomb early on the first Easter morning.

But first, who is this Mary Magdalene – or Mary from Magdala. Luke tells us that along with the twelve, she accompanied Jesus who had cast 'seven demons' out of her. Some suppose that she is the same woman who came to Simon the Pharisee's house when Jesus was at dinner, and anointed his feet, washing them with her tears and drying them with the hair of her head – a significant sign of depravity among women at that time – or as we say today, 'letting her hair down.' Little wonder that the Pharisee writes her off as an excommunicated 'sinner'. This might connect with the fact that Magdala where Mary was from - a little town on the lake of Galilee - was the place where the Roman soldiers camped. Mary of Magdala is Mary of the Roman Camp – and in the light of everything else we know about her, tradition has cast her as sensual and even sexually promiscuous.

Although Peter and John had seen the empty tomb and gone back home, Mary still remains standing by the tomb, unable to pull away as the others have done. Mary's total concern – even her obsession - is with the whereabouts of the **physical** body of Jesus. She had come to the tomb expecting to be able to anoint that same physical body that she had stood by on Calvary hill.

'I sought him whom my soul loves,' cries the bride in the erotic love poetry of the Old Testament, '*Song of Songs*'. 'I sought him but found him not. I called him, but he gave no answer.'

But then, as she turns away from the tomb Mary sees Jesus standing there, but doesn't realize that it was Jesus.

'Woman,' asks Jesus. 'Who are looking for?'

Not recognizing Jesus, but supposing him to be the gardener, she replies, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him and take him away.'

And then, perhaps just as the rising sun broke over the horizon, 'Mary,' says Jesus. Calling Mary by name, Jesus echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'Thus says the Lord, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed (or a better translation, 'liberated') you. I have called you by name and made you my own. You are precious to my eyes and honoured and I love you.'

Yes, Jesus honoured Mary in ways that no Roman soldier or any other client had ever done, but now he wants to liberate her – set her free to become the person God created her to be.

In that moment of recognition, Mary throws herself at his feet and clings to him.

But, 'Do not cling to me' or 'do not hold on to me,' says Jesus. When Jerome translated the Greek New Testament into Latin – the Vulgate (the Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church until the 20th Century,) - unfortunately he translated 'do not cling to me' from the Greek as '*Noli me tangere*' – 'touch me not' as in the Authorized, King James Version.

I really believe that that mistranslation has perverted our understanding of our relationship with the Holy God. It implies, quite wrongly, that we must not touch or handle or come near to holy things (as in the case of Mount Sinai, which the Israelites were forbidden to approach, let alone touch). It's as if God is

untouchable by you and me, the unclean and untouchables. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. St. John begins his first Epistle: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched.' Yes, - there is nothing untouchable about this Jesus and conversely this Jesus during his earthly ministry refused to regard any one - such as a leper, a dead body or a sinner - as unclean or untouchable. His healing or liberating ministry nearly always involved touch.

As the voice says to Peter in his vision at Joppa, 'It is not for you to call unclean what God has touched.' So 'do not touch me' misses the whole point of the Incarnation – Jesus came to our world of flesh and blood – bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, precisely to be in touch with us. So much in western spirituality has been skewed by this attitude to the holy as well as to the physical – especially when it comes to the material world and especially in our attitude towards our bodies and bodily functions. St. Cyril of Jerusalem says, 'The Creator of the human body's members was not ashamed to assume the flesh they are made from....Those who despise the body should keep quiet: they despise Christ himself who made it.' (*Catechesis 12: 26*)

But Mary has to learn the lesson we all have to learn. Her loving relationship with Jesus and his with her, has moved on, beyond the physical senses, but not to something less material but rather to something more substantial and more deeply intimate – not by **bye-passing** the senses, but rather by **surpassing** them, picking up the physical into the greater reality of an intimacy which is so very much more than skin deep. Louis Bouyer writes: 'There is no sexuality that is merely genital or merely sensual. It is always something that involves our whole life and personality' ultimately infusing our spirituality.

But back to Mary.

Notice Mary's response to Jesus - Rab-boni - she's reverted to Jesus, her teacher-friend, from the good old days rather than Lord, as she had previously referred to him at the tomb. She's gone back. But all relationships have to move on, and become more intimate if they are not to fixate and die. Mary must not try to possess Jesus, cling to him or hold him back from the fullness of his destiny, her destiny and ours.

There is always the lurking temptation in all human relationships to hold on to those we love, to atrophy relationships in earlier forms, by creating or perpetuating dependency and so to fixate - parents with their children; friends and lovers, seeking to perpetuate the 'honeymoon' period.

As a boy, I used to collect butterflies, kill them and pin them down in my collection. I could not do that now. Butterflies weren't made to be pinned down in glass cases as exhibition pieces: and such is not the nature of love. If we try to pin down love or relationships, they die. William Blake writes:

'He who binds to himself a joy/Does the winged life destroy./But he who kisses the joy as it flies, Lives in eternity's sunrise.' Neither Mary nor you or I, must try to hold on to the past in our prayer relationship with God in Christ, but rather press forward towards an ever more deepening intimacy with the Risen Lord who has gone ahead to prepare a place for us together with his Father and ours. So when our methods of prayer seem to dry up, take it as a sign perhaps that Jesus has moved on and wants you to move on also with him

But not only has the relationship between Mary and Jesus changed, but also between Jesus and all his other disciples 'Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to **my brothers** and say to them: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'

Brothers – and **my** brothers at that: now '**my brothers**' and sisters, because my Father is also **your** Father, and my God is **your** God. This is the new family of the new creation and we are children of the

same Father through baptism in water and the Spirit, by adoption and grace. You can't get any closer than that, either to God or to one another. Yes, 'blood is thicker than water', as we say, but water and the Spirit in the new family of God, are thicker than blood and family ties.

So Christ by both his resurrection and also his ascension back to his Father and ours, has opened up a new and living way into the very heart of God. His journey is also ours. So in our prayer journey, as St. Paul says, 'forgetting (letting go of) what lies behind, let us press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.'

Bible Passage

5. (John 20: 19-22)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.

5. From Fear to Faith:

Behind Closed Doors

(John 20:19-22)

'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'

Today, on our fifth Bible Study entitled – **'From Fear to Faith'** – we will reflect on the appearance of the Risen Christ to those apprehensive disciples behind locked doors, as St. John tells us, on that first Easter Sunday evening.

'On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews.' Yes, a defeated bunch of bewildered disciples, drawn together and literally locked in fear, in a catatonic posture, behind firmly locked and bolted doors. Fear shuts and locks you in, withdrawn into yourself: faith springs the lock and draws you out – out of yourself to the other. As St. John tells us in his Epistle, **'There is no fear in love..and he who fears is not perfected in love.'**

What did Adam say to the Lord God when God came looking for him? 'I was afraid and I hid myself.' Yet while Adam had been hiding, like all of us ever since, God - the 'Hound of Heaven' - came and still comes seeking for us in the eternal game of 'Hide-and-Seek'. So it's precisely into that situation that the Risen Christ came and still comes – sometimes even when we've shut him out of our lives and our hearts.

Although, we're told in the previous few verses, that Mary Magdalene had run from her encounter with the Risen Christ to tell those same disciples the news, second hand faith doesn't do the trick. Resurrection faith is not a doctrine you swallow: it's an experience which moves us (not always instantaneously or even dramatically) from fear to the living dynamic of faith, and hope, overflowing in love.

'Jesus came and stood among them, and said to them, **"Peace be with you,"** undoubtedly recalling in the minds of those terrified disciples, words of Jesus on the night before his crucifixion when he had said, **"Let not your hearts be troubled neither be afraid...Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you."** Or again, **'Peace be still,'** as Jesus had said on a previous occasion to the terrified disciples in the midst of a storm. So here he is again in the midst of a rather different storm.

'When he had said this he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.' Of course they were. Why? Because who was to say that he was not just a look alike – a counterfeit for the real Jesus who, only three days before, they had seen crucified. But more than that, for it was John again who tells us in his first hand account of the crucifixion about the centurion coming to make sure that Jesus was dead, before he was taken down from the cross before the Passover.

'When the soldiers saw that Jesus was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows he tells the truth – that you also may believe. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, "Not a bone of him shall be broken." And again another scripture says, "They shall look on him whom they have pierced."

So, why no broken bone? Because right at the outset of the gospel, Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God – the Passover Lamb – and according to Exodus and Numbers the sacrificed Passover Lamb must be without a broken bone, and physically whole. Now John together with Mary the Mother of Jesus, was

the last to remain on Calvary hill to the bitter end. So John saw the piercing of Jesus' side and furthermore the full significance of that.

And what is the significance of that? John wants us to know. In first century medical terms he witnessed a broken heart or what we would call a ruptured aorta. 'So', says St. John, 'I'm telling you I saw it and my testimony to its significance is the heart of the whole matter and I want you to see this and to believe what that broken heart signifies.' As St. Francis says: 'Christ died of a broken heart for love of our love.' Jesus died of a broken heart – unrequited love for you and me. That's what John wants you to see and to believe.

So here on that Sunday evening is the unmistakably authentic Jesus who was crucified, authenticated, not only by the pierced hands – that could have been anybody – but, that pierced side - the broken heart of unconditional Love himself: 'The Crucified God,' as Moltmann calls him.

Shortly after the First World War, when its memories of the pains and atrocities of the trenches were still fresh in the nation's mind, a volume was published under the title 'Jesus of the Scars and Other Poems' by Edward Shillito. The poem from which the title was taken stands first in the book and is headed by the words from this Resurrection account, '**He showed them His hands and His side.**'

If when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know today what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

There's a man on the moon' but so what? There's a wounded man in the heart of God, a space and place for us with all our wounds. A 'Jesus Christ Superstar' is no earthly use to me – I ain't no superstar! Where can I go with **my** wounds except to a God who is not ashamed of **his** wounds? There is no other god amongst all the contenders of the pantheon who eternally bears the wounds of unconditional love. So not only in the eyes of those disciples that night, but forever, Jesus authenticates himself as the real God, by his wounds – crucified, risen and glorified. So of course, '**the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord,**' fulfilling the promises of Jesus three days previously, '**I shall see you again, and your joy no man taketh from you.**' (xvi:22)

Once upon a time, there was a very successful clergy man who died and was confronted by Peter at the pearly gates, hoping for 'speedy boarding', through the 'fast track.' The successful clergyman had brought with him his marriage register, baptism and confirmation registers with huge numbers of entries, together with hundreds on the 'Electoral Roll' of his recent parish, hoping they would act as proof of his powerful and successful ministry. Peter seemed singularly unimpressed. 'I'm sorry,' said St. Peter. 'What we need to see here are your wounds – the wounds of a loving ministry. It's they which authenticate you as a true apostle of Jesus: so much else is merely counterfeit.'

'Jesus said to them, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

The law in America insists that all doors in public buildings must open outwards, in case of fire.' Well, only the fire of the Holy Spirit can turn fearful disciples into faithful apostles, turning the church inside

out, in order to let the outsiders in. The explosion of the Holy Spirit expels us from our comfort zones, to confront evil and to bear witness to the victory of Christ over death and evil. Immediately, after the baptism of Jesus, Mark tells us that the Holy Spirit 'drove' Jesus into the wilderness to initiate his mission to the world. The word in Greek for 'drove' is 'ekballo' – gives us our word ballistic – ballistic missile. Holy Spirit creates ballistic mission: **'as the Father has sent me, even so I send you'** – it's a chain reaction. The primary purpose for which the Spirit is given is not the feel good factor, but rather that fearful disciples may become faithful apostles, witnessing in their lives to the power of Christ's resurrection and theirs. We must not expect the gift, without the purpose for which it is given.

'Whom he calls he empowers,' says St. Anselm and so the commission is given here together with the power to accomplish it. So **'Receive Holy Spirit'** – (in the Greek, without the definite article) – not, **'the Holy Spirit'**. What is bestowed here is not the Divine Person, but rather the power and energy of which He is the source. Those disciples must wait for the full blown Pentecost, as indeed many of us have in the course of our long spiritual journey. The Risen Christ frees those disciples not only from fear of death, but from the fears of living, by living with faith in the ultimate victory of true love, exemplified in the crucifixion and vindicated in the resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Bible Passage

6. (John 20: 24-29)

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

6. From Information to Transformation:

Doubting Thomas

(John 20:24-29)

'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'

Today, on our sixth Bible Study entitled – **'From information to transformation'** – we will follow on from last week, as St. John does in his Gospel account, from that appearance of Jesus to the disciples in that Upper Room behind locked doors, you remember, when Thomas was **not** present, to the account of eight days later, when Jesus appeared again, but, when this time, Thomas **was** present together with the rest of the disciples.

For the ensuing eight days after that first appearance of Jesus, the disciples had told – or as the Greek indicates, - continued, trying to tell Thomas, 'We have seen the Lord.' But Thomas refuses to accept their testimony: **'Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side I will not believe.'** In a word, I suppose Thomas would say, with many today, that dangerous half-truth: 'Seeing is believing.'

But first who **was** this disciple Thomas – forever nicknamed 'doubting Thomas.' Although we know from all four gospels that Thomas, nicknamed 'Didymus' or 'the twin' was one of the twelve chosen apostles, it's only in John's Gospel that we hear him speak and so get some idea of his character.

The first occasion is at the raising of Lazarus from the dead, but it's the second occasion which connects more directly with our Bible Study today. In the Upper Room, on the night before the crucifixion, Jesus said to his disciples, 'In my Father's house are many rooms; I go to prepare a place for you...but I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way I am going.'

Up pipes Thomas: 'Lord, we do **not** know where you are going; how can we know the way?' To which Jesus replies, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.' I am the Way to this quality of life, which is stronger than death.

Can you catch just a glimpse of the sort of person Thomas was? From information derived from an apocryphal second century book – 'The Acts of Thomas' – artists have frequently depicted Thomas with a builder's T-square. Hence he became known later as the patron saint of architects. Yes, Thomas wanted to get everything cut and dried – squared away as we say, and especially he wanted more information about this whole business of eternal or abundant life. He wants Jesus to give him the precise map references for the Way to this enriched eternal life, which is stronger than death, of which Jesus speaks so frequently in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus might have retorted: 'Put your maps and drawings away Thomas, and just follow me, walking as all true disciples must, 'by faith and not by sight.'

After all, Jesus had always talked about an eternal life which he promised was greatly enriched and more substantial than this life and which eventually would make sense of pain and death, healing the wounds of this world. 'I want to see for myself all the information about the Way to that sort of life and right in the here and now. So that's the Jesus I want to see and touch, fully alive, with the wounds I saw a week last Friday on Calvary Hill as proof of his identity, as the Jesus who claimed to be the Way to that fuller, enriched and eternal life.'

So, 'all right, Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.' Suddenly the prose of analytical research is overtaken by the

poetry of wonder and worship. 'O God, now I see!' Now I see what you meant all along, and I was blind to.' And then without even touching Jesus, 'My Lord and my God! Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.'

As well as being the patron saint of architects, Thomas is also by tradition the patron saint of the blind, precisely because of this earlier spiritual blindness. Paradoxically, it's often the most physically handicapped who are the spiritual athletes. Perhaps it was through Beethoven's physical deafness that he was blessed with the gift of that inner hearing of more wonderful music than those with physical hearing. And so with the physically blind, like Bartimaeus, who had a greater perception concerning the identity of Jesus than the crowd who could see Jesus with their eyes. As Jesus opened the physical eyes of Bartimaeus so he opened the spiritual eyes of the heart of Thomas who until that moment was spiritually blind. For as St. Paul says: 'The things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen, are eternal.'

It was a spiritual insight which the Risen Christ gave to Thomas that day, even greater than the visual proof that Thomas had demanded. In a flash, Thomas saw, perceived and finally understood the Way to this greater life beyond death and of course the Way to that greater life is through a belief which is more than belief in information, facts and figures. It's essentially the way of belief as **trust** in a **Person** - the One who is the Way who has walked the talk, every step of it, all the way from heaven to earth and hell and back again, to meet us where we are, in order to take us to where we need to be, - just in fact as Jesus had promised on that Maundy Thursday night. St. Augustine, didn't see the Risen Christ in flesh and blood, practised what he preached when he said, '**Credo ut intelligam**' - '**I believe in order to understand**' - I believe **first** in order to understand later. The believing precedes the seeing - a seeing which evolves into a deeper perceiving

But it's the next few verses which put all this in context. St. John says, 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.'

Yes, through believing and trusting in Jesus you will find the Way to that eternal, enriched and abundant life, of which Jesus is both the living proof as well as the Way to it.

So the Way to this eternal life is essentially a life in relationship with Jesus, the Lord of life, as our personal Lord and God, as we walk with Him who is the Way, willing to set out before we understand everything, - walking 'by faith and not by sight.'

For the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty and in all relationships - whether with God or with others - we can never be certain. Frederick Buechner says: 'Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith' - it's what keeps you moving! 'Seeing is believing.' No, Thomas! Try the other way about: 'Believing is another way of seeing - perceiving, - perceiving the greater vision and the deeper truth.'

So that encounter of Thomas with the Risen Christ was indeed a life changing encounter for Thomas. From then onwards he began to see everything very differently.

Several apocryphal books are attributed to Thomas. Tradition tells us that he was not only finally convinced that the Way of the Cross and the nails and the spear is the way to fullness of life and love, but that he himself finally walked that way with Jesus the Way, - all the way when he himself was martyred in the year 72AD with a spear or a lance. In many paintings, Thomas is pictured with the lance or spear with which he was martyred. Yes, the way to true and real life is the way of the nails and spear, taking up **our** particular Cross and following Jesus all the Way, who is the Way to true and real life, **through** death.

But then tradition goes on to tell us that doubting Thomas was transformed through his life-long faith and trust in Jesus, who led him all the Way to India where he founded the Church in India which to this day is still called the 'Ma Thoma Church' – the Church of St. Thomas.

Thou art the Way: by Thee alone
From sin and death we flee;
And he who would the Father seek
Must seek him, Lord, by Thee.

Thou art the Way, the Truth, The Life:
Grant us that Way to know,
That truth to keep, that Life to win,
Whose joys eternal flow.

Bible Passage

7. (John 21: 4-12 & 15-17)

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, and 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards* off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.

7. From Failure to Forgiveness:

Peter

(John 21:4-12 & 15-17)

'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly'

Today, on our seventh Bible Study entitled – '***From failure to forgiveness***' – we will reflect on that life changing encounter between Peter and the Risen Lord, in that concluding and enigmatic chapter – chapter 21 - of John's Gospel.

The Chapter opens with a picture of a somewhat uneasy Peter, who although knowing with his mind that Christ had risen, had still not made this his own in such a way as to change his life-style. Why? Because, guilt and failure were still there – on Peter's side, although most certainly not on Christ's side, as we will see. It was this guilt concerning Peter's denial which was holding him back and actually turning him back to his former way of life. So, he's reverting to the old self: it's still that old Simon. Peter, Christ's new man, has not yet finally taken over. It's still Simon the fisherman and not yet Peter the Shepherd.

So, to cut a long story short, Jesus sets up this amazing face-to-face encounter between himself and Simon Peter, over breakfast prepared jointly by Jesus and the disciples with the fish – and wait for it – ***around a charcoal fire. 'When they got out on land, the disciples saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it.'***

You know it takes a lifetime to read and decode the amazing literature of the fourth Gospel. What's so important you might ask about a charcoal fire? I'll tell you. Do you remember an earlier charcoal fire, exclusively recorded in John's Gospel. Yes, - it was that terrible night before the Crucifixion, when Jesus was on trial at the 'Kangaroo Court' of Caiaphas. The beloved disciple (again, as always, not named) had smuggled Peter into the courtyard to overhear the trial. Warming himself by that charcoal fire – it was there, never to be forgotten, that three times before the cock crowed to summon the dawn, - it was by that charcoal fire, standing and warming himself, that Peter had denied Jesus.

And now, here beside another charcoal fire as dawn was breaking, Jesus turned and looked at Peter as he had done on that fatal night, face to face with Simon. Perhaps by the light of that charcoal fire, Peter experiences a flash back to that first scene beside that other charcoal fire.

'Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' Notice Jesus reverts to Peter's former name. But why, I wonder, '***more than these?***' Possibly, several reasons. Was Jesus pointing to the remains of the 153 fish and saying in effect, 'Do you love me more than you love fish and fishing?' Or possibly was he referring to that earlier occasion, just before the crucifixion when Jesus had predicted the desertion of all the disciples, but when impetuous, old Simon blurts out, '***Although all the others forsake thee, I will not,***' implying that he loved Jesus more than the other disciples: and now look what he did – not only did he forsake Jesus like the others, but denied he ever knew him – and three times at that.

But no, - something more profound, yet. Do you remember the equation between love and forgiveness which Jesus spoke about with that woman who anointed his feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee? He said of the woman that (I quote) '***her sins, which were many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.***' Yes, love and forgiveness are inextricably interwoven and interconnected, and John uses exclusively in his gospel, the symbol of that ***charcoal fire*** to make that connection between sin and loving forgiveness – 'the Gospel of the Charcoal Fire'.

So 'Yes, Peter do you love me more than the other disciples, precisely because you have let me down more than the others, since those who are forgiven much love much? My loving forgiveness of you is unconditional. In the knowledge of my love for you, more love will be released in you. For the door through which sin and failure enter, is the same door through which, love and grace break through.'

But let's get the equation straight, as St. Paul needed to do. 'Shall we sin more that grace may abound?' Certainly not! In *prospect* we must always seek to avoid sin, but not because it wounds our pride, (that's just guilt), but because it wounds the one who truly loves us. But, in *retrospect*, when we have sinned, and repented, our restored relationship is deeper and more wonderful than if we had not sinned. So St. Augustine can say: 'O Felix Culpa' – O happy sin, since God can and does bring greater good out of evil, and because, as Augustine also says of that woman, that 'she might never have felt the need to come to Jesus unless she had sinned.'

But notice Jesus doesn't even refer to Peter's threefold denial; he simply asks Simon if he loves him, albeit even if Simon can only give a little bit of his heart to Jesus : it's a start back on the road to recovery.

I love the fact that there's no 'cover up' for Peter in any of the gospel accounts. He's presented as a deeply flawed human being: bumptious, pretentious, wouldn't let Jesus wash his feet; disloyal and unreliable. That was old Simon. But look what the grace and loving forgiveness of God did for him – not instantly, but slowly – two steps forward to becoming Peter, the Rock-man and one step back to old Simon again, and not just three times, seven times or seventy times seven, even – but falling back repeatedly to the old self to the end, if that old legend of 'Quo Vadis' is to be believed. Such is the bumpy ride of the spiritual journey – one hell of a ride for perfectionists who can't bear being wrong!

So three times, by that charcoal fire, Jesus without referring to the past, simply asks Simon, 'Do you love me?' In the Greek, all Peter is able to say each time, - 'I am your friend.' Peter can only reply to the invitation to *agape* love, with the affectionate word of friendship (*philia*). But notice how Jesus accepts this, and builds on it. 'Feed my lambs': then, 'Tend my sheep' and finally, 'Feed my sheep.' The failed fisherman is being invited to be a loving, nurturing shepherd to the flock of Christ, reflecting the love and pastoral care he himself has received as a lamb from Jesus the Good Shepherd, for we can only love with the love, we have been loved with.

The church isn't there to make us feel guilty for our failings and weaknesses. Rather the church needs today and in every generation, pastors who have themselves been to both of those charcoal fires, figuratively speaking, : the one as the fire of the night of failure, but also the other - the fire of love and forgiveness - in the light of a new day and a new beginning. Eliot is right: In the end there are only two alternatives: 'consumed by fire or by fire.'

Our secular culture doesn't know what to do with failure. But the good news of the gospel is that God has dealt, once and for all, cosmically and personally, with failure – moral or otherwise.

Sister Maria Boulding writes: 'Though God is an almighty lover, he too can find himself shut out, and he too longs to find an open door of vulnerability in us. It is extraordinarily hard for us to realize this, conditioned as we are by a secular ethic of success and a religious ideal of moral perfection which may have very little to do with the Gospel of Christ....God does not propose to us some lofty, rigid ideal to which we must attain by our own unaided human resources.....We must live from our weakness, from the barren places of our need, because there is the spring of grace and the true source of our strength, as Paul discovered: "When I am weak, then I am strong"...For many of us it is difficult to live honestly from this place of failure and weakness. Even if we know with our heads that we should, we still slip back into the old attitudes and behave as though God were expecting us to succeed and making his

love conditional upon our achievements. If we have become hardened in such an attitude, it may take some deep experience of failure to disabuse us.'

So can I finish by suggesting that this particular bible study above all others needs to be read and prayed in the first person, since all that it suggests is deeply counter cultural, especially in our day and with our paradoxically judgemental, and moralistic secular mindset. In prayer, stand with Jesus, our Risen Lord, beside whatever happens to be your particular '*charcoal fire*' – the occasion or place of your failure and weakness.

And then, hear Jesus say, 'David, Jane – Do you love me?' All you might feel able to reply is, 'You know everything about me Lord, I want to love you,' or 'I want to want to love you.' And then the Lord's response, with that original formula with which it all began back in Galilee for Peter, as for all disciples: 'Follow me.'

Bible Passage

8. (Matthew 14. 23 -33)

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

8. From Religion to Faith:

Peter walking on the water

(Matthew 14. 23 –33)

'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'

In this last in the present series of Bible Studies entitled: 'From Religion to Faith' the central character once again is St. Peter. Once again the scene is the Lake of Galilee and the disciples in a boat crossing over the sea. Jesus is not with them in the boat, 'he went up on the mountain,' the narrative tells us, 'by himself to pray.'

But let's just freeze that scene for a moment, and before we come back to it, reflect on our relationship with God who has revealed himself and continues to reveal himself in the Person of Jesus, the Living Word of God, who came and continues to come to mark the end of institutional religion and to open up a new and living way into the heart of God Himself. For that is where we ultimately belong. So, let's start then at the very least by assuming that you and I really do want to know God, but not in order to box it up and package it as theology in the limited dimensions of our finite minds, but rather that other kind of knowledge (Pascal calls the knowledge of the heart) – knowing God, as in a relationship with God, through prayer and worship, – wobbly and weak and prevaricating though we know ourselves to be.

So we are in that boat – the ship – *navis* (in Latin) therefore the nave of the church with all of the disciples of Jesus throughout the ages – but all at sea, as we say, rather like in the story we've just heard read.

And so back to those disciples: they're going it alone – without Jesus in the boat. Oh, of course, we're full of good intentions, running his church and committed to our times of prayer and worship. But it's all about essentially what **we** are doing, - regarding prayer itself essentially as something **we** do, giving directions and directing, navigating **our** way – and yes, it's probably a very good way in many ways, partially struggling against the prevailing winds of our culture, and yet inevitably swept along by them. But – and this is the point – we are still essentially in control, with our hands firmly on the tiller, relying on the energies of the engines on board to take us forward and to bring us to the haven we have determined for ourselves. But, '***in the fourth watch of the night,***' (that would have been just as dawn was breaking), 'Jesus' the day star who always heralds a new day, new life, a new opportunity and a new beginning, comes '***to the disciples, walking on the sea.***'

If the Incarnation means anything, it highlights the amazing love of God who longed to be 'in the same boat' (as the saying goes) together with us in his humanity, – but always and only in so far as we will let him in. Like all true love, Jesus our courteous Lord, never forces himself on us. Yet, all our longing for Him, is but the echo in our hearts of his original longing for us from before time and before we were conceived in the womb.

So, as God always has and always will, this Jesus longs to reveal himself, to his church and to each one of us as he truly is, rather than as we imagine him to be. Yet, so often we do not recognize him, as we are so full of ourselves; so full of concerns about what we like to call **our** church, **our** boat, with its programmes and plans for remodelling and rebuilding so that we can trim our sails to the prevailing winds of our secular culture.

'It's a ghost!' they cried out. 'No, not a bit of it, ***it is I: have no fear.***' Yes, fear is the enemy of faith and trust and it's fear which always holds us back from the adventure of faith. But faith like love, St John tells us in his epistle, cannot 'come to perfection where there is fear.' It's fear which counsels us not to

flee the nest: it's fear which demands that we cling tightly to what we know and understand: and it's fear which fuels religion and religious extremism - that fundamentalism not only in religion, but in every aspect of life. We are living in an age of the shaking of the foundations, yet God can give us the eyes of faith to see this as a time to go deeper and uncover those foundations which cannot be shaken. And as St. Paul says, 'No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.'

'If it is you,' shouts Peter from the boat, 'tell me to come to you on the water.' 'Come,' replies Jesus – as he has been saying since the dawn of time. 'Come to me all who are heavy laden and I will refresh you.' 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.' 'Come, my children, inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.'

And so gingerly, Peter steps outside the boat – the comfort zone of religion and the institutional church, from the known to the unknown – into that cloud of unknowing – where it's necessary, as we say to think 'outside the box' of the familiar and where we must necessarily walk, if we are to walk at all, 'by faith and not by sight.'

You see to enter into real prayer, in a relationship with God in Christ, in one sense we need to enter into an alien element as at our first birth, when we left the waters of the womb, for the fresh air as the new element, taking in the breath of new life. And so, when we are born again, we reach forward in faith, into that further new element of the Spirit – the wind and breath of the Spirit requiring very different lungs. In that new element, we are no longer in control, for the Spirit, like the wind, says Jesus, 'blows where and as it wills.' Literally you won't know whether you're coming or going! In that new element of the Spirit in which we are called out by Christ to live the new life, all we need to do is to open our sails to the wind of the Spirit, switch off our ego-driven engines so that the wind of the Spirit takes us to Jesus, for the Spirit like the church, the bible and the sacraments points and looks to Jesus, as Jesus in turn points us and takes us to His Father and ours.

For, the true and living church is a community of people who have been literally called out ('ecclesia') in faith, from all that we have ever meant by religion. For Christianity isn't a philosophy; it isn't an ideology or even a religion in the strict sense of the word: Christianity isn't anything, Christianity is somebody: it is Jesus and the resurrection – to use Paul's sound-bite.

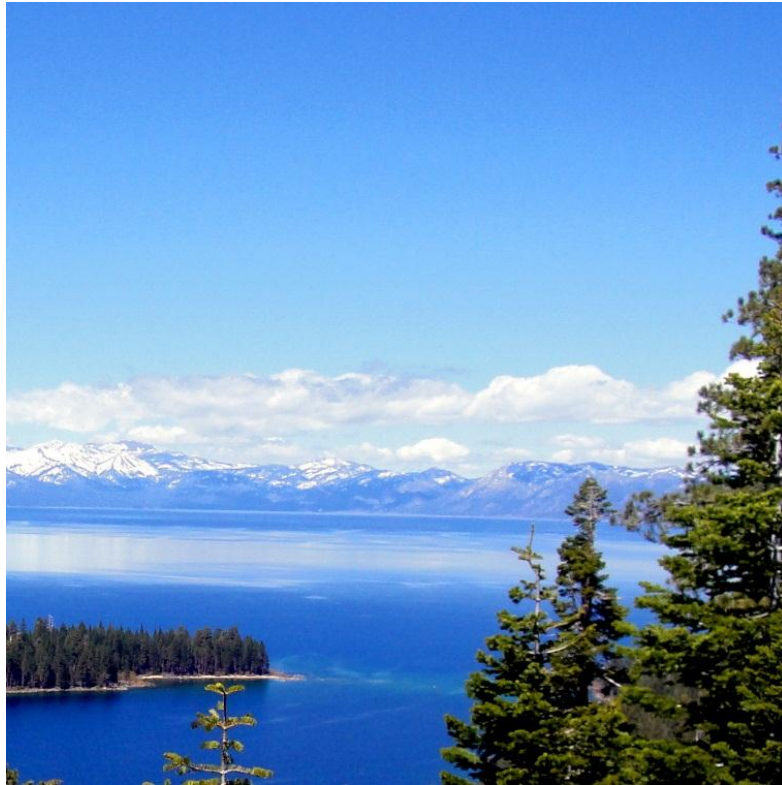
'Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me." Yes, the minute we become self-conscious and take our eyes off Jesus, (take our eyes off the ball, as we say) we're sunk!

I really believe the church has in so many ways and so many places (not all) taken our eyes off Jesus, and have been blown off course by the prevailing winds of issues, problems and factions.

Yet, at least, Peter realises that only Jesus – admittedly, if only as a last resort – can save him: neither the boat, nor his abilities and skills, his talents or his natural strengths. He has learned, as we must learn, that our faith and trust must not be *in* the church (that boat); not *in* the bible or *in* the sacraments or *in* our own righteousness, but only *in Jesus, the Saviour of the World* – Jesus, to whom all these should point as means and not ends – to Jesus who is both in the boat (the church), but also beyond it.

So prayer is not our achievement: all God asks is that we come to Jesus, setting time aside to devote exclusively to the 'Yes' of faith. So in the silence now we open ourselves to that persistent and eternal invitation to come to the Father in and through Jesus the Son and let him continue his saving work in you and me and through you and me, in and for his church, and through the church for his world.

He will take care of the storms of the world around us as well as the storms within us, in His way and in His time faithfully fulfilling his promise to be with us and with His church, yes literally in the same boat as well as beyond it, to the end of the age.



Services in the future

We hope to begin a new session of short lunchtime services with Bishop Michael and The Rev'd Soon- Han here at St Stephen Walbrook in the autumn. Details will be found on our websites or if you provide us with your contact details we shall let you have information when it is available.

SPA

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For further Information visit the websites below:

www.ststephenwalbrook.net
www.londoninternetchurch.org.uk
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