



## **'A WAY OF LIFE'**

'This day I put before you the way of life and the way of death  
CHOOSE LIFE'  
(Deuteronomy 30 :19)

### **Transcripts SERIES 2**

## **Bishop Michael Marshall's**

### **Bible Studies**

from a series of short lunchtime praise and study sessions, designed to help led us to silent contemplative prayer, which took place between the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2011 and the 28<sup>th</sup> November 2011  
at  
St Stephen Walbrook

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

with

**Bishop Michael Marshall and The Rev'd Soon Han Choi**

## 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. InThee 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.

## **Eight Bible Studies at St Stephen Walbrook**

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

### **Autumn Series**

10 <sup>th</sup> OCTOBER	'An Enriched Life'	(John 2: 1-11)
17 <sup>th</sup> OCTOBER	'An Enlightened Life'	(John 3: 1-12)
24 <sup>th</sup> OCTOBER	'A fulfilled life'	(John 4: 7-15)
31 <sup>st</sup> OCTOBER	'An Empowered Life'	(John 5: 2-9)
7 <sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER	'A Directed Life'	(John 6: 16-21)
14 <sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER	'An Envisioned Life'	(John 9:1-7:13-17 & 24-25)
21 <sup>st</sup> NOVEMBER	'A Transcendent Life'	(John 12: 1-8)
28 <sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER	'The Source of all Life'	(John 15:1-9)

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

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)



## Contents

Introductory Session .....	6
1. John 2; 1-11 .....	6
1. An Enriched Life; .....	7
2. (John 3: 1-12).....	10
2. 'An Enlightened Life' .....	11
3. (John 4: 7-15).....	14
3. 'A fulfilled life' .....	15
(John 4: 7-15).....	15
4. (John 5: 2-9).....	18
4. 'An Empowered Life' .....	19
5. (John 6. 16-21)) .....	22
5. 'A Directed Life' .....	23
6. (John 9:1-7:13-17 & 24-25).....	26
6. 'An Envisioned Life' .....	27
7. (John 21: 4-12 & 15-17) .....	30
7. 'A Transcendent Life' .....	31
8. (John 15:1-9).....	34
8. 'The Source of all Life' .....	35
For further Information visit the websites: .....	40

**[www.ststephenwalbrook.net](http://www.ststephenwalbrook.net)  
[www.londoninternetchurch.org.uk](http://www.londoninternetchurch.org.uk)  
[www.spapray.org.uk](http://www.spapray.org.uk)**

## Introductory Session

### Bible Passage

#### 1. John 2; 1-11

'On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

## 1. An Enriched Life;

### (John 2: 1-11)

#### INTRODUCTION

As you know, from the *Book of the Acts of the Apostles*, in Antioch, we weren't called Christians at the outset, but rather 'Followers of the Way,' - followers of Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life – the Way to true life and a new way of life, hence the title of this whole new series – 'A Way of Life.'

John in his gospel, rather than speaking of the life of the Kingdom of God, prefers to talk of 'eternal' or 'abundant life', and in the course of his Gospel he records seven of what he calls signs, rather than miracles, which Jesus did. These seven signs point us to a new way of life in God through the person of Jesus, who has come – to use his own words in John 10:10 - that we might have life and have it more abundantly or more fully in him and through him with His Father and ours - the blending of our human life, restored and sharing in the divine life, and furthermore, all this in the here and now and not just in the hereafter. That shared life John calls the glory of God and he sees the signs as Jesus revealing that glory to disciples who slowly but surely come to have faith in him. So today, in this the first in our new series we are looking at the first of the signs – the well known story of the Wedding Feast at Cana of Galilee, when Jesus turned water into wine.

'*On the third day there was a wedding.*' So with John the third day has a deeper meaning, signifying resurrection talk – talk about that new, resurrected, richer life brought about when the 'water' of our natural life and the grace, the Spirit and the life of God are wedded and bonded together.

And again we need to seek an inner meaning with this failure of the wine – when the wine runs out. All the promise of youth, of our natural energies and our enthusiasm ultimately exhaust: they run their course but in the end run out, not only in the natural cycle of spring, summer, autumn and winter but in the course of all life.

So '*They've run out of wine,*' says Mary to Jesus. Such is the nature of intercessory prayer. Don't try to tell God what to do. Rather all we need to do is to carry on our heart the concerns of others, raising our hearts in a simple heart-to-heart with the Lord: 'Lord, Clive has lost his job.' 'Susan is not well.'

The reply of Jesus appears at first sight to be especially harsh and even dismissive. However, 'woman' in the Greek, is not such an abrasive or dismissive term. Far from it, for Jesus uses the same word from the cross when he lovingly commends John, his best friend, to his mother and *vice versa* – 'Woman, behold your son.' 'Good lady' might be better.

So, one biblical commentator suggests. 'It's all right, mother. My time has not yet come.' '*Mine hour*' as throughout the whole of John's Gospel, means the hour for manifesting his glory. So contrast this with the words of Jesus towards the end in chapter seventeen on the eve of his Passion: 'Father! The hour has come; glorify thy son'. Yes, then it will all hang out in the cross and resurrection, when we see paradoxically humanity at its greatest, bonded with the divine life.

For as Irenaeus said; 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive,' with an abundant life and a quality of life when nature and grace work together stronger than death. A life that unlike that first wine, never runs out.'

And so the miracle of transformation begins, as it always begins and can begin in your life and mine. When is that? When we align our natural energies with the energies of the divine life: when God and man work together and when we take him at his word, as Mary did when she accepted to be the mother of Jesus. So, 'Do whatever he tells you' – take Jesus at his word, and even when we do not understand. When we walk by faith and not by sight with a total trust in Jesus expressed with a simple yes or Amen to his word.

*Six stone water jars were standing there.* Now again in order to decode John's Gospel we need to understand that seven was the Jewish number for completion, as when God rested on the seventh day because his work was complete. So the six stone water jars represent as John tells us 'the Jewish rites of purification.' It's as though he's saying – the law and the prophets of the old covenant were not complete and will not quite cut it. So here is Jesus in effect signifying that as he himself said, 'I've come to fulfil the law and the prophets, not to abolish them but to take them – those six stone water jars and what they signify' - and finally complete and fulfil them. So plan B does not replace Plan A but brings it to completion.

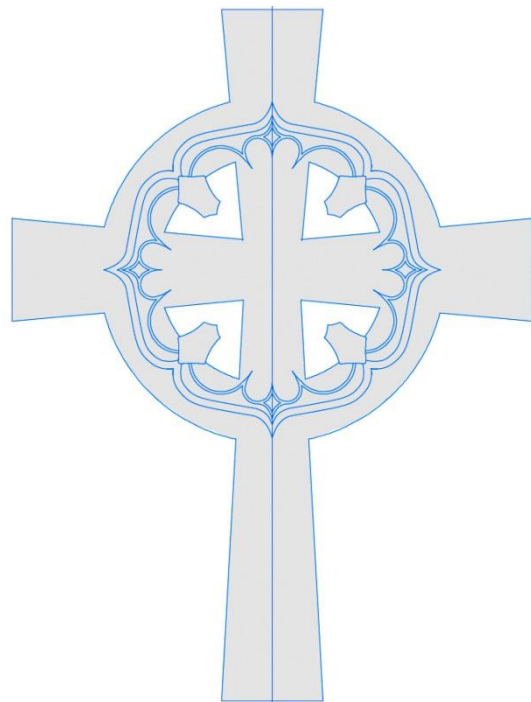
And so the drama gathers momentum, as the surprised steward of the feast says to the bridegroom, 'Every man serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine that is not so good, but you have kept the good wine until now.' William Temple commenting on these words says: 'There is a trace of emphasis on the word *'man'* in the Greek, implying a contrast between what we do naturally and what the bridegroom appeared to have done.' Yes, this miracle signifies the change effected by the touch of Christ upon our lives, enriching them as wine is richer than the insipid water. And furthermore, that the best is yet to come.

Every man puts forward first what is best about him. When people first meet us, they generally find us civil, friendly, considerate, when we put our best foot forward first, as the saying goes. But as they come to know us, especially if they have to live with us, they have to put up with what is not so good – less good, or in the words of this text, 'that which is not so good.' But in our relationship and journey with God it is the very reverse. As we deepen our fellowship with him, made known in Christ, at every stage on the journey we can find ourselves saying. 'No Lord, you have kept the best 'wine' until now...until now ...until now,' from glory to glory advancing' as the hymn writer puts it.

And so Christ manifested his glory – to show us what human life in an ever increasingly intimate relationship with God through Jesus and the shared life of the Holy Spirit can be – as different as water is to wine. That's the glory he manifested and still manifests for those with eyes to perceive. The ruler of the feast didn't know as most people most of the time, don't know what on earth our God of surprises God is up to. The servants knew as all faithful, trusting servants of God begin to have a clue about his loving purposes. But, only disciples who follow Jesus begin to catch glimpses of this glory of which the insipid water transformed into wine signifies. Not that they understood it, far from it, but those handful of disciples were beginning to believe in him and therefore their lives were beginning to be transformed by grace and the touch of Christ. Water into wine is but a pointer to the greatest miracle of all – changed and transformed lives, which is the heart of the gospel message.

Followers of Jesus, the Way to true life, who put their faith and trust in him begin to experience that transformation and change of life, as God reveals in and through Jesus something more of that glory of the full potential of our humanity, not unlike that change from insipid water into fully matured wine – and the very best wine at that!

John concludes the story: 'Jesus did this, the first of his signs and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.' So at the very end of his Gospel to summarise, John writes: 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that through believing *you* may have life (that abundant life) in his name.' (John 20: 30-31)



## Bible Passage

### 2. (John 3: 1-12)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus\* by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You\* must be born from above." The wind\* blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you\* do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

## 2. 'An Enlightened Life'

### (John 3: 1-12)

Welcome to the second of these Eight Monday Lunch-time Bible Studies throughout October and November – 'Bible Studies with a Difference.' As you know, from the *Book of the Acts of the Apostles*, we weren't called Christians at the outset, but rather 'Followers of the Way,' - followers of Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life – the Way to true life and a new way of life. Hence the title of this whole new series – 'A Way of Life.'

So today it's the story in St. John's Gospel of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night, and discovered, a new way of life – '*an enlightened life*' through a relationship with Jesus the light of the world.

*'Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night.'* St. John's Gospel makes three references to this Nicodemus: once here at the beginning, again in the middle of the Gospel when we find him defending Jesus to his fellow Pharisees in the Council meeting, and again finally at the end of the Gospel, when together with Joseph of Arimathea, preparing the body of Jesus for burial on Good Friday evening.

Here at the beginning of the Gospel, Nicodemus comes to Jesus, we are explicitly told, '*by night*,' possibly lest his fellow Pharisees should get to know that he was talking secretly with Jesus; or again possibly to 'suss' out this controversial Jesus, who had already fallen foul of the religious establishment. Essentially, Nicodemus is coming to get more knowledge and information *about* Jesus in addition to what he thought he already knew or from what he had already read about Jesus. '*We know*,' he says – yes, he'd done his homework.

But, you see if we come to our Bible study and prayer or indeed attend church only seeking more knowledge and more information about Jesus, that in itself will not bring about a changed outlook on life – that new abundant life. You see Jesus wants to offer Nicodemus and you and me a very different kind of knowledge.

But back for a moment to that nocturnal visit, because John's Gospel is full of symbolism – especially with the images of light and darkness. Right at the outset in the Prologue of the Gospel, we read, 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.' And again in a later chapter, 'This is the judgement, that light has come into the world, but men and women prefer darkness.'

Furthermore, Jesus says of himself, 'I am the light of the world,' with the implication that all who come to him are enlightened by him, reflecting his light, so we as disciples are to Jesus the Light of the world as moons are to the sun!. I like to call Nicodemus the patron saint of moths, because like moths he was drawn irresistibly through the darkness of the night and the darkness of ignorance and wrong knowledge, to Jesus the light that shines in the darkness.

*'Rabbi,' says Nicodemus, 'we know that you are a Teacher sent from God.'* No, Nicodemus! You're still in the dark. That sort of knowledge will never reveal who I truly am. You need to experience a different kind of knowledge – what Pascal calls 'the knowledge of the heart'; the knowledge that comes through really knowing somebody and not just something about them, in a truly heart-to-heart relationship. As the wise fox in de Saint Exupery's 'Little Prince' says, 'Here is my secret. It's very simple. It's only with one's heart that one can see clearly.'

So at first sight the reply of Jesus appears rather disconnected: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, 'Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.'

So here is Jesus, saying to this very religious figure, 'I'm afraid, it's back to square one – you've got to start all over again and become as a little child, without all the trappings and presumptions of the cultural conditioning, nature and nurture of religion. And that will require a fresh start – a supernatural rebirth, not only of water (as in natural birth) but of water *and the Spirit*. (Incidentally, do you remember John the Baptist's reply to the Jews, when they came to him to suss *him* out. 'I baptize with water. But the one who is to come will baptize with water and the Spirit.' Or as in the Prologue to John's Gospel: 'To all who received him, (Jesus) to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children, born not of natural descent, nor of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.'

But still trapped in the analytical knowledge – information knowledge (in the dark) Nicodemus says, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' That's logical isn't it?

But no Nicodemus, logic alone won't get you all the way to that other new way of life we call the Kingdom of God, or eternal life. That requires a different kind of knowledge that only comes through a relationship with the *source* of life; knowledge which enables us to know as we are known by the one who knows us and loves us unconditionally. Paul said – and he was a Pharisee originally, a very distinguished one – 'I count everything as so much garbage for the *knowledge* of Jesus' – but another very different kind of knowledge.

And so finally Jesus comes clean. 'Unless you are born of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.' The knowledge of *information* needs also to be wedded to the Spirit of *inspiration*: both sides of the brain, if you like; or of heart and brain alike, by getting to know a person through a relationship with them (that other kind of knowledge, *connaitre*, as the French say) rather than knowledge of facts about them from their C.V. (or *savoir* knowledge as the French distinguish it). 'If you want to know me: live with me' we sometimes say. And so as Jesus promises, 'If anyone loves me and keeps my word, my Father and I will come and make our home in him.'

Only the waters of natural birth together with the Spirit of a supernatural life bring about a new relationship with God through Jesus, so that the life we live is his life at work in and through us in a totally new way of life.

As Ezekiel prophesized. 'A new heart I will give you and a new Spirit I will put within you and I will remove from you the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.' (Ezekiel 36: 25-26)

Nicodemus thought he'd come to Jesus for a nice late night drink and a cosy theological discussion. Instead, Jesus offers him, as he offers each one of us, nothing less than a heart transplant, or what St. Paul calls a 'circumcision of the heart.'

So it's that 'birth' which is a kind of death to the old, cutting the umbilical cord that binds us still to the old religion. It's that kind of re-birthing which constitutes the new life in an ever increasingly intimate relationship with God, – the living God, who draws us through the darkness of idolatry and half truths to the full Light of Christ, in whom is unending life and unconditional love. Yes, Nicodemus thought he was coming to Jesus to discuss religion: instead, he was beginning a long journey into the heart of God through a relationship with Jesus.

The danger is that we can come to our Bible study with the same approach– collecting more information in an age of information technology : in effect googling God, if you like, and putting Jesus in Wyopedia. Our own age is an age in 'information overdrive.' As Eliot says: 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?' For there are many today who want to use Scripture simply to gather information and answers to issues by pulling proof

texts. Jesus said to the Pharisees, 'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, but you refuse to come to me to whom the scriptures point.'

True Bible study points us through but ultimately away from the text of the written word to the living Word – Jesus, with whom through prayer and silence, we're drawn into a prayerful relationship with himself: (praying the scriptures and not just reading them): enlightening the mind, (yes) but warming the heart and firing the will to a new and enlightened way of life.; not simply seeking more knowledge *about* God, but rather pressing forward on our spiritual journey in a heart-to-heart relationship (that other kind of knowledge); a relationship which eventually draws us into the very heart of our Trinitarian God, as in the prayer of St. Richard, we come to know him more clearly, but with a different kind of knowledge; love him ever more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day. AMEN. (And that really is Bible Study with a Difference).

## Bible Passage

### 3. (John 4: 7-15)

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. 'A fulfilled life'

(John 4: 7-15)

So welcome to the third of these Eight Monday lunch-time Bible Studies throughout October and November – 'Bible Studies with a Difference' entitled, 'A WAY OF LIFE.' And by way of Introduction may I remind you again that as we know from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, we weren't called Christians in the very earliest days of the Christian Church, but rather '*Followers of the Way*' – followers of Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life – the Way to true life and a new life. Hence the title of this whole new series – '*A Way of Life,*' and in this session – '*A FULFILLED LIFE.*'

And today it's the story in St. John's Gospel of the Samaritan Woman at the Well, who met Jesus not only accidentally, but providentially, at Jacobs well as Jesus was passing through Samaria – Samaria, the no-go area!

Jesus was resting while his disciples went into the town to buy some food, when he encountered this Samaritan woman. And despite all the barriers of race, religion, colour, gender, nevertheless Jesus opens up to this Samaritan woman of doubtful lifestyle, who understandably, at first draws back. '*How is it that you, a Jew, are talking to me, a woman of Samaria?*' for as the narrator adds, 'for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans'.

Indeed they didn't. The violent conflict between Jews and Samaritans went back centuries to an earlier bloody conflict, so that a Jew travelling from the north to Jerusalem in the south for the festivals would always take the longer route *around* Samaria, rather than the more direct route *through* Samaria. Yet, here is Jesus, for whom there are no no-go areas, deli

berately contravening all usual practices and the cultural conditioning of his Jewish background.

Yes, how indeed can God have anything to do with sinful humanity? Only because that's precisely what Jesus did in the Incarnation, breaking through all the barriers we have erected to meet us – as he met that woman – wherever we are at our point of need.

So how, - but why? Because he longs to be with us, far more than we with him: remember that next time you don't feel like praying. 'Herein is love,' says St. John in his First Epistle: 'not that we loved God, but that he first loved us.' So in prayer as in everything, the initiative is always with God – a God, who like the love he is, always goes out of its way, all the way – even through the guilt or inhibitions of our little Samarias and no-go areas, for as George Herbert said, 'No door can keep him out!' and all this in order to encounter us at our point of need – for that is his desire.

'*Give me a drink,*' he says to that woman on meeting. Yes, clearly Jesus in his humanity was weary and thirsty. But if we are to decode John's Gospel, this thirst of Jesus has a deeper significance, as it did on Calvary Hill, when he cries from the Cross as he was dying, '*I thirst.*' Yes, of course physically – but oh, so very much more! He thirsts for us, so we need to go very much deeper if we are to recover and uncover the deeper significance of this whole encounter at the well.

So back to that well again. In Scripture, meetings at the well have a special significance. Rebecca, who became Isaac's bride was found at a well by Abraham's servant, who went in search for a bride, for Abraham's beloved Son. Jacob also met his future bride, Rachel, at a well. Moses met Zeppora, his future wife at a well.

So says one Biblical Commentator: 'The meeting of Jesus and this Samaritan woman at the well is a meeting of love. Jesus the divine bridegroom (for that's how Jesus refers to himself in the Synoptic

Gospels, and how Jesus is referred to in the Book of Revelation of St. John)) came to reveal his love to all who are thirsty and seeking to draw water from the well of love.

For this woman is thirsty for more than just water: she, like all of us, is thirsty for unconditional love. We are told later in the story that she had had five husbands, and that the man she was now with, was not her husband. Quite a girl! So Jesus holds out to her – as to each one of us – in the symbolism of water and thirst, himself as the ultimate and only totally satisfying and fulfilling relationship of an unending and unconditional love that never runs out – a love that never dies.

*‘Everyone who drinks of this water’ (in the well) ‘will thirst again, but whosoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal, (abundant) life.’*

The woman immediately replies in words that must be the prayer and life-long craving of her heart, yours and mine: *‘Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst,’ nor keep coming back here to draw water.*

Indeed – for Jesus, and God alone in him and through him, is ultimately your one and only totally fulfilling spouse. The others, whether five or fifty, can never totally satisfy that longing and thirst which originates from God and ultimately can only be fulfilled in him. You see all our human loves and loving (and nothing I say must underestimate their importance), nevertheless ultimately they are fulfilled only if they point beyond themselves to Jesus – the well of life – a well that will never run dry – yes, a love that never dies.

So we must not despise our loves – whether of people or animals or things – when we discover that they can’t go all the way; can’t fill or totally fulfil that emptiness and quench our unquenchable thirst. God is not asking us to cool our desires, - far from it, but rather to redirect them. So, don’t demand that anyone or anything should completely fulfil you : the best of marriages are at best only a compromise. As Augustine said, ‘We were made by God and for God and our hearts are restless until they rest in God.’ Richard Rolle, the fourteenth century mystic, puts it like this: ‘Since the human soul is capable of receiving God alone, nothing less than God can totally fulfil it, which explains why lovers of earthly things are never satisfied.’

So, I venture to say that all our human problems, yes especially at the present time, arise from a mistaken belief that someone or something, somewhere could totally fulfil me and satisfy that thirst – that longing. We seek to quench that thirst and longing in all kinds of ways: as shopperholics, alcoholics, using booze, sex, possessions, drugs, success, esteem, like emotional ‘polyfillers’ and substitutes for the real thing; greed (whether financial or with food and drink; - and there is nothing wrong in themselves with any of these things. The trouble with all these substitutes is that you have to keep coming back for more and more (we call it addiction, and a godless culture like ours will always be an addictive culture, raping the planet in its insatiable quest for fulfilment, as enough never proves to be enough). But Jesus said, ‘Seek *first* the Kingdom of God and his rule in your heart and all these other things will then be added.’ But, put them first in the place of God and you will never be fulfilled.

So later in John’s Gospel, still with this symbol of water and thirst, Jesus stands up in the Temple precincts and shouts to the crowds, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ Why? Because a truly fulfilled heart overflows with love for others, as ‘need love’ (and that woman like all of us was very needy in her thirst for love) – as ‘need love’ is displaced at last by ‘give love’, - a love that draws directly from the source of all life and unending love: in a word from God, who is love.

So I truly believe that this same Jesus, through his Holy Spirit is not only standing up in our churches and religious places but also in the temples of Mammon today – whether at the checkout of our supermarkets or in the Stock Exchange, or our Gambling Casinos or whatever or wherever, and saying

what he said so long ago in the Temple precincts in Jerusalem, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink from me, the well of life, - a fulfilled life - and whoever comes to believe in me, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'



## **Bible Passage**

### **4. (John 5: 2-9)**

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. 'An Empowered Life'

(John 5: 2-9)

***'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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 6. 16-21))**

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles,\* they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, 'It is I, do not be afraid.' Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

## 5. 'A Directed Life'

### (John 6: 16-21)

So welcome to the fifth of these lunch-time 'Bible Studies with a Difference' entitled, 'A WAY OF LIFE.' As I've said before, the overall title of the series, - 'A Way of Life,' - reminds us that in the earliest days of the Christian Church, we weren't called Christians, but rather *'Followers of the Way'* – followers of Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life – the Way to true life and a new life, and in this the fourth session, to 'A DIRECTED LIFE.'

*'When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum.'*

This familiar story of the stilling of the storm is found in various forms with varying details in all the gospels. In St. John's account however, it has a very different slant to it. John tells this familiar story in such a way as to minimise, if not to eliminate, the miraculous element of the stilling of the storm, as in the other accounts, in what is the fifth of those seven *signs*, which form a continuous thread throughout the fourth gospel. As we have found in our bible studies of the first and third signs in John's Gospel, there is – for those with eyes to see and ears to hear – an inner significance in these *signs* of *general* application to all who would seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ and followers in the Way. The purpose of the seven signs is not so much to be found in their miraculous element, but rather in the change and transformation brought about in the lives of those who receive God into their lives through the self revelation of Jesus, who reveals his glory and strengthens the faith of all those who are coming to believe in him.'

*'It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.'* So yes, in the symbolism of John's Gospel – of course, it was dark, and they were still in the dark, as we say, - symbolically as well as literally - precisely because Jesus the Light of the World *'had not yet come to them.'* We saw last week how life without God in Christ – the Light of the world – is life in the shadows, and in previous weeks, how John traces the conflict between light and darkness throughout the whole of his Gospel. (As just one example, John dramatically records the sudden departure of Judas from the Last Supper: *'And Judas went out and it was night.'* Yes, Judas had chosen the way of darkness and turned his back on Jesus and the way of light and life.

*'The sea rose because a strong wind was blowing.'*

So here are the disciples *without Jesus in the boat*, (John is at pains to underline that); thrown off course and in the darkness losing their direction ('all at sea', as the saying goes) when suddenly, we read, *'they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat.'*

In the other accounts of this similar incident, they thought at first, as we say, that they were seeing a ghost. It's sad that for so many people religious experience is always associated with ghosts and things that go bump in the night. For so many, God, religion and superstition are all in the same package, and associated with fear. Walking under ladders; Friday thirteenth; no 13<sup>th</sup> floor in American apartment buildings) There's no chance of a personal relationship with that kind of God. But Jesus came to show us a very different face to God. In this sign Jesus wishes to reveal himself, to you and to me as he did to those terrified disciples, as a Friend and Brother with the same heavenly Father and furthermore, as being by his Incarnation literally 'in the same boat' as the saying goes in times of stormy waters and

turmoil, as well as in times of prosperity and joy. Such a God is a very different God from that of the ghostly alien God of religion and superstition.

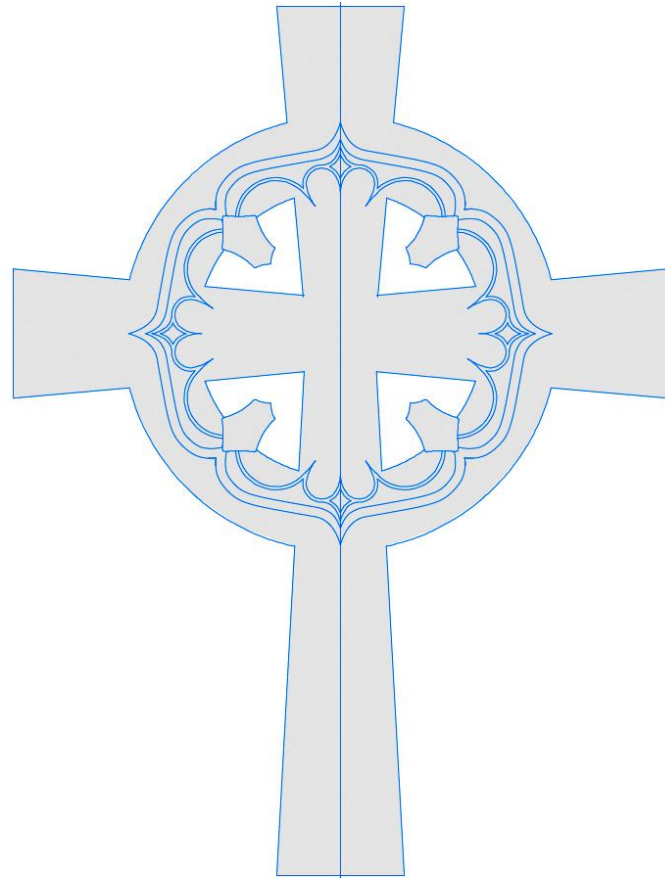
*'It is I; be not afraid.'* The way John puts these words into the mouth of Jesus is highly significant, and really does let the cat out of the bag! *'Ego eimi'* in the Greek – literally translated as 'I am', is identical in the Greek with that of the Septuagint translation from the Hebrew of the Old Testament and is exactly the name God gave to himself when he revealed himself to Moses and to others – 'I am that I am.' But that God was a faceless God, inviting fear. Jesus puts a very different face on the face of God, inviting faith and not fear: trust and not terror. So it follows: 'Be not afraid.' That phrase heralded the very beginning of the goodnews of Christ, right at the beginning of the gospel account: 'Be not afraid, behold I bring you good tidings of great joy,' the angels sang to those fearful shepherds.' Yes, again and again, when God wants to do some new thing in our lives, we need to hear those words of re-assurance: 'It is I; do not be afraid.' It's all right, it's me.'

*'Then they were glad to take Jesus into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.* In the other accounts of the storm, all the emphasis is on the miraculous stilling of the storm with the words: 'Peace; be still.' John however, does not mention that the storm ceased and that there was external peace and calm. Rather, he is much more interested in the fact that they received Jesus into the boat gladly and that once Jesus was with them, they were where they were supposed to be, - they had arrived, in all senses - with the peace and stillness in their hearts, even if the storm continued to surround them. They were re-centred in God, who is the centre in the eye of all the storms of the world. Re-centred in him and He in us, our experience as well as the greeting of the risen Christ was and always will be 'Peace', even if external storms and turmoil prevail.

For Christians do not escape the storms tumults, turmoils and torments of the world, but so long as they are re-centred in God they will be in the centre of the eye of the storm, as we say, which is literally a place of stillness, silence and peace. This change was brought about in the hearts of those disciples, resulting in an eyewitness account which told and continues to tell of the change brought about when Jesus was welcomed into the boat, (into our lives), experienced first-hand (possible by John who was in the boat) as a transformation from fear to faith and from torment to peace in the disciples' lives and hearts, together with the re-direction of their lives. (It's almost as though John is replicating the words of psalm 107, as experienced in that storm: *'When they cry to the Lord in their trouble : he delivereth them out of their distress. For he maketh the storms to cease : so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad, because they are at rest: and so he bringeth them unto the haven where they would be.'*

Though in John's particular account of this storm, he does not say that the storm ceased or that there was calm. The point of this way of telling the same story, is something much more wonderful. It's all about the peace and sense of direction which issues from the time we receive Jesus Christ into our hearts and into the heart of the church – the nave (navis in Latin) or boat of the church.

*'And immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.'* Yes, geographically it was Capernaum, but John tells it in such a way as to imply an inner security that comes from direction and purpose in our lives, as opposed to being driven by the latest fads and fashion, fears and issues. So, something more wonderful than geographical direction is implied in this sign. When we cannot or will not come to God, he comes, because he first came to us in Christ. All we need to do is to welcome him afresh into our lives and hearts (in the same boat) as those fearful storm-driven disciples did so long ago. Remember what Jesus said: 'My peace I give unto you, not as the world gives give I unto you.' Put another way: 'It's all right: I'm with you. It is I, do not be afraid.' Emmanuel - God with us in the *midst* of it all; in the *mess* of it all and in the *mystery* of it all.'



## Bible Passage

### 6. (John 9:1-7:13-17 & 24-25)

‘As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. Now it was the Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them,, “He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.”The Pharisees answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out, and when Jesus found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshipped him. Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to Jesus, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”’

## 6. 'An Envisioned Life'

(John 9:1-7:13-17 & 24-25)

So welcome to the sixth of these lunch-time 'Bible Studies with a Difference' entitled, 'A WAY OF LIFE.' and in this, the sixth session, when we shall reflect on that way of life which is 'AN ENVISIONED LIFE.' We find stories of Jesus giving sight to the blind in all four of the Gospels, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, that when the Messiah came, among other signs and wonders, 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened.'

In this, the sixth of those signs, some of which we have been studying in John's Gospel, we see the fulfilment of that prophecy, in the healing of the man born blind. As we've already seen in previous weeks, In these 'signs' in John's Gospel, there is less emphasis on the miraculous nature of the event, and a greater emphasis upon the significance and the transformation brought about by the encounter with Jesus – and in this particular sign – with Jesus as the 'Light of the World' who St. John stresses in the famous prologue to his Gospel, is that 'light that enlightens everyone' who come to believe in him. 'As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth.' Here again, as we're constantly finding with these signs in the Fourth Gospel, there is a greater theological point, to be made: the man born blind is in some sense everyman, - you, me, Tom, Dick and Harriet. For theologically, it's part of the fall-out of Adam's original sin that by nature we are all blind, or partially sighted, until the eyes of our minds and hearts are opened by Christ, the Light of the world, who enlightens everyone who come to put their trust in him.

In this sign in particular, there is so much compacted together in what can only be described as a drama, and furthermore a drama like many dramas in which ironically, roles are reversed. For by the end of the dramatic three-way encounter between the blind man, the Pharisees and Jesus, the blind man by his experience is enlightened, while the religious establishment, namely the Pharisees because they are locked in their tradition, culture and ideology, are blinded, as they ask Jesus, indignantly, 'Surely, we are not blind, are we?'

But first, to what Jesus did for this blind man. Notice that he both speaks and touches him. Voice and touch are extremely important for blind people. So Jesus anoints the man's eyes with a kind of paste made from his saliva and dust, and then, speaking to the man, tells him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man washes in the pool and returns to Jesus with his sight. But, but as in the previous chapter, once again this provokes religious conflict with the religious establishment.

'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.' Although the application of spittle to the eyes, which was considered very salutary, (in the Roman world as in the whole Middle East), nevertheless it was expressly forbidden by Jewish tradition on the Sabbath, and furthermore the making of the paste would also be forbidden being regarded as a form of work, and so constituting an even greater infringement of Sabbath rulings: a double wammy!

And so St John, with superb irony, as in good drama, proceeds to reverse the rolls. For, by the end of the encounter, it's clearly not the man who is blind, but rather the Pharisees who are blind in the deepest sense of all, for as the saying goes, 'They can't see what's staring them in the face.' It wasn't the man's fault that he was blind: Jesus established that at the outset. Rather, it's the Pharisees who are at fault, because they insist that they can see the whole truth, when in reality they are blinded by the very tradition and ideology which is intended to point beyond itself to the fullness of truth. They have turned the signs posts of scripture, the law, tradition and religion into finishing posts; means into ends,

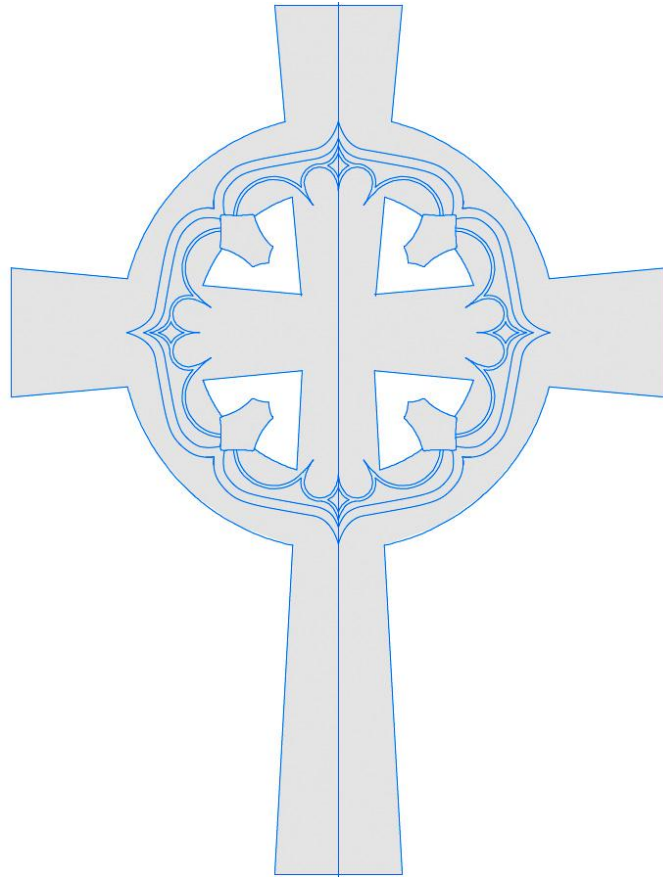
icons into idols. For God's sake, could those Pharisees, steeped in the law and the prophets, not see the fulfilment of that prophecy of Isaiah staring them in the face – make the connection? Here is Jesus is opening the eyes of the blind before their very eyes. But no, they were blind: blinded by a religion that had degenerated into an ideology.

So here we are faced with two opposing kinds of knowledge. When the blind man is challenged by the Pharisees as to the veracity of his claims, he simply says, 'All I know is that I was blind and now I see.' He is speaking from experience and the knowledge of the heart, although he clearly does not pretend to understand it all. However, the Pharisees on the other hand, claim a very different kind of knowledge. Their knowledge is bound up with, and indeed imprisoned by, a religion based on tradition and the letter of the law rather than the spirit. 'We know that this man is a sinner.' 'We know, you know! 'We know that God has spoken through Moses, but as for this fellow Jesus, we don't know about him.' And the greatest irony of all, is of course that religion, which should be the source of ever an ever increasing enlightenment on our ongoing, spiritual journey to the sunrise, paradoxically and ironically so often blinds us to the ultimate truth, as we refuse to leave the shadows of half truth in our man-made, religious, comfort zones and follow the Person of Jesus on a spiritual journey of faith. For the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty, and we are not in the certainty business. Certainty of that kind binds us and blinds us to further explorations, prompted both from experience as well as revelation. 'Jesus came to save us from religion' says Paul Tillich: religion derived from the Latin – religio – 'that which binds'; a bond that is always in danger of degenerating into a new bondage – a religion of obligation rather than of love. Contrariwise, Jesus came to set us free, with a freedom derived from a relationship with him through prayer and worship, and sealed by the Spirit of love and truth. As John again says in his Prologue, 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.'

But the continuing significance of this sign, as we have seen in the other signs, is far reaching and applies to each one of us, and not least at the present time of religious and ideological conflict, when many – like that man in the story - are being cast out, excommunicated or persecuted because they cannot be fitted into the man-made boxes of this or that religious system. For the contrast is striking between these religious men imprisoned in their ideology and this man living out of experience, saying simply how things are. So we see the Pharisees closing up more and more - becoming increasingly blind and short sighted, while the ex-beggar opens up more and more to the truth. As his eyes are opened, so too are his heart and his understanding. He begins by knowing – as he says to the Pharisees – 'this man called Jesus.' Later, and again while talking to the Pharisees he sees Jesus (I quote) as 'a prophet' and someone who 'comes from God.' Finally, he comes to believe that Jesus is 'the Son of Man.' The story ends with the man saying, 'Lord, I believe,' and worshipping Jesus. For knowledge about God, if it is not to atrophy and harden our hearts, must slowly deepen into a personal knowledge of God – a living faith and trust in a living God - as revealed in the person of Jesus, because as John again says, in that Prologue, 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.'

So at every stage of the spiritual journey into the sunrise of God's ever increasingly revealed glory, we need to pray to the Holy Spirit who alone can lead us into the fullness of truth, (as Jesus promised) in the words of the ancient hymn to the Holy Spirit – the 'Veni Creator' – 'Thy blessed unction from above, is comfort, life and fire of love; Enable with perpetual light, the dullness of our blinded sight.'

Or as the psalmist says: 'My heart tells of your word, "Seek my face." Your face, Lord, will I seek:' forever and forever. Amen



## **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. 'A Transcendent Life'

### (John 12: 1-8)

So welcome to the seventh of these eight lunch-time Bible Studies when we shall reflect on that way of life which is a truly 'TRANSCENDENT LIFE' – IN OTHER WORDS, A WAY OF LIFE WHICH POINTS BEYOND ITSELF, in love, worship and service, - life for others.

So the scene is the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary – but which Mary? William Temple and other bible Commentators assume that she is the same Mary to whom Luke refers in his gospel account of a similar scene: '*a woman in the city, a sinner*' who brought, as Luke tells us, *an alabaster cruse of ointment,.....wet Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped them with the hairs of her head, kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.*'

St John however tells the story from a different angle and with a deeper significance. Here again it's a supper party, with Jesus as the guest of honour. Martha is serving; Lazarus hosting Jesus at table and Mary sitting at Jesus' feet in adoration and contemplation. You see, with Mary it's all or nothing – it always had been. So – hands, tears and even the hair of her head are involved in worship and service. Words – as in contemplative prayer – only play a small part for Mary. After all, as we say, actions speak louder than words, and not least when it comes to love. So little wonder that here worship is primarily body language - the whole body and the five senses are involved in this bodily *showing* of love to the physical Body of Christ. And similarly with prayer and worship. Malcolm Muggeridge said: 'The trouble with this generation is that it's got sex on the brain and it's the worst place you can have it!' Well the same with worship: worship *only* on the brain is the worst place you can have it. 'Prayer,' said Theresa of Avila, 'is not thinking much: prayer is loving much.'

So this scene gives us a clue as to what the church is intended to be and intended to do when 'two or three are gathered together' with Jesus in the midst and everyone expressing and showing their love for the Lord in different ways, through worship *and* service, when, as we sing in the well known hymn, 'All for Jesus, all for Jesus, that must be the church's song.'

It's as though the very air they breathed on that evening in Bethany – all the dynamics – were harmonized in deep gratitude and thankfulness for all that Christ had already done for each of them. After all, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, (saved his life), so Lazarus was eternally grateful – he owed his very life to Jesus, (in much the same way as you and I do, if the truth be known). Then, you remember, Jesus had answered Martha's prayer to come to the tomb of Lazarus, so here she is gladly serving as her expression of gratitude and love for Jesus, no longer 'grumbling' as she had previously done that her sister Mary was not helping in the kitchen. And as for Mary: well, like a true contemplative she had simply lost her heart to Jesus. So all three are deeply grateful and literally – as we say – cannot do enough for Jesus. They are bound together in *deep gratitude* for all that Jesus has done for them, and it is that sort of gratitude to Jesus which should keep us all together in his church – a deep gratitude to Christ, to whom *we* owe *our* very lives and for whom he gave and gives us his; to this same Jesus who answers *our* prayers; to Jesus, *our* heart's desire.

Little wonder then as St. John tells us, that the house was filled with the sweet smelling fragrance of that costly ointment. For the whole environment in that house is one of gratitude – or in a word *Eucharistic* – for of course that is what the word Eucharist literally means – thank you (or just 'ta'). For Eucharist is not so much a church service: it's much more a whole way of life - a life lived in deep

gratitude to God for all that we are, all that we have and all that we are becoming – a gratitude overflowing in love and service for others, for God and neighbour.

*And only* such an attitude of gratitude can rescue ministry and service to others from a condescending do-gooding. We need to perceive service to others as another way of worshipping Jesus, for as he said, 'in as much as you have done it to the least of my brethren, you have done it to me.'

So gratitude, should inevitably be expressed in service and going out of ourselves in self transcendence, since worship and service are inextricably bound together. It's never either/or. In Hebrew as in English, worship and service share the same root-meaning. So, 'when the worship is ended,' we say, 'the service begins.'

But of course, if we are to go on showing love in the face of hostility or indifference, then such showing of love will inevitably be costly. St. John emphasises the cost of that ointment, given by Mary. As we sing in that hymn by George Herbert : 'And the cream of all my heart, I will bring thee' – yes, *'the cream'* not just the dregs or semi-skimmed!

Sadly Judas is blind to this kind of costly, sacrificial generosity, you remember, for in fact he did not love the poor, John tells us. Rather he loved riches and he was a thief we are told, and scripture warns us that the *love* of riches does indeed blind us to the true value of things. So Judas is all set to sell Jesus on the cheap; for 30 pieces of silver - the equivalent of a month's wages at that time. (By contrast, John is at pains to tell us the ointment was worth three hundred denarii – a denarius being a day's wages and therefore three hundred as being the thick end of a whole *year's* salary)

But Judas has got all his values wrong and that's the very nature of sin. You see the opposite of sin is not virtue, but true worship. When your values and priorities are right, when you know the true value or worth (yes, worthship) of something or somebody, then you cannot sin – you cannot *abuse somebody*, or *misuse something* when you know how very much they are worth: when you attribute to people and things their true worth or their worthship. Such is the nature of true and appropriate worship. (And remember, as St. Paul says, we've 'been bought with a great price: you and I are priceless in the eyes of God).

It's in worship that we lose ourselves, and go beyond ourselves, ecstatic – 'standing outside of ourselves', for that's what the word ecstatic means from the Latin: but ecstasy not as the drug culture knows it. They need the *real thing* and have been fobbed off with a second-class, fraudulent substitute. In worship, wonder and adoration we are freed from self-consciousness and are broken open to become aware of a higher consciousness of another and ultimately of that ultimate Other, who is not only within us but also beyond us – beyond words and images. It is our self-centredness which so limits our perceptions and robs us of the vision of the bigger picture. Both individually and as a materialistic and self-serving culture, we are desperately in need of a renewed awareness of the transcendent. Our tin gods are too small!

But finally, back to Mary, possibly the same Mary out of whom Jesus had cast seven devils – Mary the street woman. Worship and adoration constituted her great breakthrough. (And transcendent worship leading to loving service is precisely what our whole civilisation is craving today, though we don't know it).

In the past, the outward, visible and tangible had carried little or no commitment for the old Mary. But now it was through that same body and all her senses, she had so casually given to others that she is able to express and give totally, of her inward and spiritual self. And so, as in marriage, this giving is transformed into a sacramental act of integrity, in which both outward, physical and sensual as well as the inward and spiritual, converge beyond themselves in love, - the love of God and the God of love.

(That is true chastity when *everything* within us is aligned, pointing to a single point of convergence in the heart of the other – the beloved. The fragmentation of sensuality was at last healed: not by *suppressing* it, but rather by *expressing* it to someone worthy of a total offering of all that she had and all that she was. No wonder Jesus had earlier commented in Mark's account, that 'wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world,' this story will be told, for it is the very heart of the gospel.

## Bible Passage

### 8. (John 15:1-9)

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes\* to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed\* by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become\* my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

## 8. 'The Source of all Life'

### (John 15:1-9)

So welcome once again to our lunch-time Bible Studies with the overall title of 'A Way of Life.' In this eighth and last in the present series, we will reflect together on the 'Source of all Life' – the source of an abundant and fruitful life.

'Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."' St. John addresses the teaching of Jesus primarily not to the mind, offering us more information about God – knowledge in that sense. Rather, St. John wants to go deeper and get to the heart of the matter and draw us into a deeper relationship with the Christ and in and through him with his Father and ours – helping us to know God in that deeper sense, by being in a relationship – an intimate and heart-to-heart relationship with him.

So on Maundy Thursday, in the Upper Room, after washing the disciples' feet, in the following four chapters Jesus lays bare his heart, speaking to his disciples from the heart, about his relationship both with his disciples and also his relationship with his Father and theirs.

'I am the true vine,' says Jesus, with the emphasis on true. Repeatedly, in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God – in all the major prophets and in the Psalms: for example, "The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel," in Isaiah.

For the vine had actually become the symbol of the nation of Israel. It was the emblem on all their coins at one period and also one of the glories of the Temple was the golden vine sculptured over the entrance – the 'Golden Gate.'

But Jesus, in identifying himself with this symbol, insists that he is the 'true vine' - in Greek, 'the real,' 'genuine' or 'authentic' vine,' since most references in the Old Testament to Israel as the vine, speak of it being a degenerate vine. So when Jesus goes on to say, 'Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit,' he's not mincing his words. The test of a godly life or a godly church is whether it bears fruit in good works – and furthermore, as Jesus says elsewhere – 'fruit that will last.'

So the measure of a Christian life is not whether it is successful, but rather whether it is fruitful in works of love, compassion and service to others. The word successful is scarcely ever found in the New Testament.

But what is the secret of a fruitful life? Where do we draw the resources for that fruitful life? It is here that the words of Jesus speak most poignantly to each and every one of us.

'Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.' The branch of a vine or of any tree depends totally on drawing up the life-giving sap – the source of life - from the roots, if it is to bear leaves, fruit or flowers. Cut flowers from the flower shop initially give the appearance of being alive and indeed may open up with great promise. But because they are cut off from the root and the source of life-giving sap, they quickly wither and die, because they have only a cut-flower existence.

Many Christians, myself included, abstract the *teaching* of Jesus away from the *person* of Jesus, striving to model their lives on the commandments, like that Rich Young Ruler who said to Jesus rather despondently, that he had kept all the commandments since his youth, and it doesn't seem to have got him anywhere. No it didn't and it wouldn't. A 'goodie goodie' does not commend the glorious and joyful

life-force of Christ by just trying to keep the rules: just keeping the rules never won any sporting match. It's no commendation of a life, when we say of someone that they never did anybody any harm! Moral rectitude, which is not the overflowing of love and a life rooted in and grounded in love, is so often insipid or unattractive. When Jesus said *'I am the good shepherd,'* the word he used in Greek was not the word for moral goodness, but rather another word for 'good,' - 'good,' in the sense of beautiful, - good, like a good work of art – or 'attractive', or as one writer suggests, - 'winsome.' We've all met the goodie goodie who puts you off for life. A caricature of Christian goodness is to holiness, what an imitation silk flower is to the real thing.

So Jesus goes on to draw out the full implication of the analogy of the vine and the branches. *'Abide in me and I in you.... He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.'*

Now this word 'abide' is one of the key words throughout John's Gospel, like links in a chain. Right at the beginning, when Andrew and another disciple (possibly John himself) first meet Jesus, they ask him where he lives – where is his abode. 'Come and see,' replies Jesus. So we are told they spent the rest of the day with him in his abode: *stayed* with him, *remained* with him.

This same word occurs twenty times in these key, four chapters. The word epitomizes this intimate relationship between Christ and his disciples and also with his Father and ours, rooted and grounded in Christ, 'evermore dwelling in him and he in us,' as we say in the Prayer of Humble Access. And all this reaches its amazing climax when Jesus finally lets the cat out of the bag – *'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love.'*

The goal of all discipleship, is union with God through union with Christ in the Communion of the Holy Spirit. The intimacy here implied is beyond mere religion and rules: it is the intimacy of fellowship or a shared life in and with God, through Jesus Christ through whom we come to the Father the source of all life and love.

And here I have to confess to a lifetime's misunderstanding. When Jesus says later in this section, *'If you love me you will keep my commandments,'* I wrongly supposed that unless and until I gave myself full marks for keeping the commandments, not only could I not really love God, but that he would not love me. But of course I got the cart before the horse: you don't earn love by trying to please: rather you inevitably *want* to please, once you know you are loved and seek to respond in love, with love. *'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but rather that he first loved us.'*

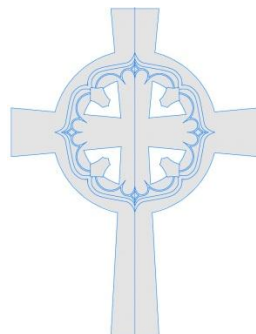
It's God's unconditional love for me that is the root from which I draw my love for others - the foundation on which my whole life can be built. It's God's love for me which is the bottom line, and it's as I begin to know that – not just intellectually, but from the heart – that I can respond with love and draw on his love for me, in order to be fruitful in loving others with the love with which I have been loved.

In all languages, we speak of two people being 'in love.' It's an experience before it is a concept, and it is self-evident whenever you see it. Well – hold your breath: that's what we mean when we say we are Christians – men and women 'in love' – in the love of the Father, in union with Christ and in the communion of the Holy Spirit. And don't let anybody kid you that this is just for the pros – monks and nuns. This way of life which is rooted in the source of all life – in the life of God himself – is open to every Tom, Dick and Harriet.

Previously, Jesus underscores this breath taking invitation: *'If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home (our abode) and abide with him.'*

Keep those words and that invitation of Jesus and take it away in your heart today: recall it in times of prayer and worship; when you receive your communion next time or even when you cannot pray, and your life will change slowly from winter to spring; from the aridity of mere morality to the joy and fruitfulness of an abundant and enriched life, in the love and service of others.

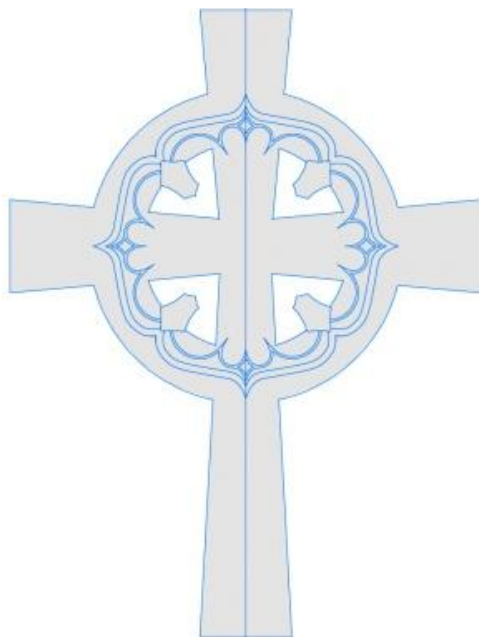
And so finally, you will experience for yourself the truth in the last words of Jesus, in today's reading: *'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.'*



# NOTES

# NOTES





## **SPA**

Scripture Prayer Action  
St Stephen Walbrook  
39 Walbrook London  
EC4N 8BN

**For further information visit the websites:**

below:

[www.ststephenwalbrook.net](http://www.ststephenwalbrook.net)  
[www.londoninternetchurch.org.uk](http://www.londoninternetchurch.org.uk)  
[www.spapray.org.uk](http://www.spapray.org.uk)

**Pamphlet designed and edited by Roy Hyslop**