

They have taken the Lord

Reflections on the post-resurrection appearances

Stuart Buchanan



Introduction

The post-resurrection appearances are a bit like those last few revision lessons the teacher fits in before the exams. Jesus won't be able to cover the whole curricula in this period, but needs to touch again upon some of the more important issues; the ones that he knows are most likely to come up; the questions that we are most likely to face in life. Jesus continues to teach his disciples but the methodology has changed. Gone are the crowds and the miracles. The change in methodology is like the change from lectures and practical demonstrations to small group seminars. Without the crowds, everything becomes far more intimate and the deepest feelings of the disciples are touched. Issues are raised for the disciples to reflect upon, and then Jesus returns to unpack these reflections further and help the disciples explore their feelings, understanding and very identity and purpose in life.

But Jesus also needs to let the disciples know how they can find and contact him in the future. The disciples come to a deeper and lasting understanding of what their discipleship is really about; an understanding that will resource and sustain them through all of the challenges that they will face as they live out that faith and, in most cases, die for that faith.

The Old Testament writers sometimes use the image of a valley to make a powerful point both within their narrative and this style is also found within some of the psalms. We descend down one side of the valley and, on ascending the other side, notice the mirror image of the issues we have explored on the way down. The issues appear to be similar, but the journey across the valley has changed the perspective that we have of those same issues. Perhaps this is because we are looking down as we descend into the valley, but as we ascend the other side we are looking up.

As we read of the resurrection appearances, from Easter Day until the ascension, we will start with the narrative of the empty tomb, the absence of the physical Jesus and a message from the angels. As we reach the other side of the valley we conclude with the account of Jesus' ascension. Again there is the absence of the physical Jesus and a message from the angels but, in between, everything has changed and the disciples have a very different understanding, a very different faith and have been changed in other ways by their encounters.

In the Christian year Advent is a time of preparation for Christmas and Lent prepares us for Easter. Those who observe these seasons of preparation usually find that the more serious that you are in your preparation, the more you are able to enter into, appreciate and celebrate the festival that follows.

Easter, where through the passion, crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus achieves the victory on the cross that earns our salvation, is the pinnacle of the church year. The season of Easter ends with the ascension, closely followed by Pentecost. The church year then continues through what is often, and I believe unhelpfully, referred to as 'ordinary time'. A thesaurus suggests the following synonyms for the word 'ordinary': normal, commonplace, usual, regular, everyday, conventional, average, familiar. Given the absence of the big special Christian festivals, periods of preparation and public holidays, we may feel that these words are suitable replacements for the word 'ordinary', but the word 'ordinary', in respect of 'ordinary time', comes from 'ordinal numerals'; the way in which the different Sundays are allocated a number, either before or after a key church festival, to identify them.

If we take seriously the post-resurrection accounts, then 'ordinary time' should be far from ordinary; it should be extraordinary. It should be a time when we should expect to encounter the risen Jesus and recognise him afresh, and respond to him in new and exciting circumstances. With the knowledge that Jesus has achieved salvation on our behalf I believe that the period from Easter until Pentecost should rightly be considered as a time of preparation. Easter is the pinnacle of what Jesus has done for us, but

how we live out our discipleship during the rest of the year should be the pinnacle of our response to Jesus. It is through the post-resurrection appearances that Jesus prepares us for living out our faith after he has ascended. If you have been using spiritual resources during Lent, then the season of Easter might not be the obvious time for individual or group study of this material, but there is a lot of opportunity between Pentecost and Advent, when you may wish to explore what this material offers.

The post-resurrection narratives begin and end with the absence of Jesus. There might well be times, either within your own spiritual journey or when you look at society and the world, when Jesus appears to be absent or distant. I invite you to journey across this valley, with the disciples and consider their thoughts, feelings and discoveries and how these insights might help us as we both live out the Easter hope within our lives and sustain the vision and of the risen Jesus and seek to find Jesus again during those times when Jesus may appear to be distant or absent. This resource can be read as it is, but it has been structured so that it can be used over a five-week period, with six reflections and questions each week for individual consideration or group discussion. The hope is that the material assists you as you live out your own faith and encounter the risen Jesus anew within our changing world.

Stuart Buchanan

Scripture quotations are taken from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicised edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Part 1: Easter Day

1 The empty tomb

‘Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.’

Except that isn't really how Easter Sunday begins. The first words in John's account are not 'He is risen', but 'They have taken the Lord' (John 20:2).

The powerful accounts of the Holy Week events climax in Jesus' trial, then the torture and agonising death on a cross on Good Friday, followed by the numbness of Holy Saturday. But Easter Day starts with a final torment; the numbness of Holy Saturday gives way, initially, to the emptiness of the tomb; a sense of despair and of incomprehension and confusion. Christ's body appears to have been taken. Every culture develops traditions and activities with which to try to help cope with the grieving process; one of ours is arranging the funeral. For the women who visit the tomb on Easter morning, the task will be preparing the body with spices. Because we have something that we need to do, with these activities and arrangements, we can allow activity to distance us from the full emotions of loss and grief. The women arrive to fulfil the necessary tasks, but cannot do these as the body has gone.

But there is an additional depth of despair here. In our imagination, we begin to enter into the agony of those who don't know where the body is. We sometimes hear of horrific stories of people, particularly children, who have been abducted and murdered and, although the murderer has been caught and convicted, the murderer refuses to reveal the final resting place of the victim. The friends and family continue to mourn, but struggle to find closure because they don't have a body to lay to rest. There is no grave and there is no site where the ashes were spread or scattered.

But with a leader, such as Jesus, the body being taken resonates with current trends that attempt to deny that an individual or a movement or culture ever existed. The terrorist's body is buried at sea, or in an unknown grave, so that his follower's cannot find a location as a focus for their remembrance of the individual. Take away remembrance and you eventually have forgetfulness, the hope is that the person will eventually be forgotten.

Colonialism saw whole people groups virtually wiped out, particularly in the Americas; often this was caused more by disease than by deliberate action. From time to time we hear stories of the discovery of ancient civilisations, but because the site has long been forgotten, the people of the civilisation have also been forgotten. The twentieth century saw attempts to destroy whole ethnic groups; the Armenian people during World War I and the Jewish people during World War II. Before commencing his genocide against the Jewish people, Hitler was able to look back and ask, 'Who remembers the Armenian genocide?'¹

We also come across what is known as cultural vandalism. In recent years the Taliban destroyed the Buddhist cultural heritage in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Daesh (also known as ISIS, IS or Islamic State) destroyed some of the pre-Islamic cultural heritage of Iraq and Syria. Further back in history European countries have tried to destroy the cultural heritage of countries they have fought against or conquered. If there is no body or grave, or no people group or cultural history left, it can become as if the person or people group never existed. It becomes not just death, but annihilation; the person or people group are soon forgotten. Given that the victors usually write the history, then people and cultures are easily deleted from popular history.

So before we proceed to meet with the risen Christ, let us journey with the women to the tomb. Christ has died. Despite what he had said about rising again, this seemed so far outside of the realms of possibility that his followers hadn't even begun to imagine it could happen. As they journey towards the tomb, they believe that they have a tomb with a dead body in it. They still have the example of the life Jesus had lived and the narrative of his life can be written down, as can his teaching. Examples of his life and his teaching will be remembered and passed on to future generations; he will be remembered by many as a great prophet and healer.

But the empty tomb has the potential to change all of this. In a generation or two Jesus will be forgotten. It will become as if he never existed. As we stand with the women in the empty tomb, and before we prepare to meet with the risen Jesus, we need to ask ourselves two questions: what difference would it make to me and my life if Jesus hadn't risen? What difference would it make to me and my life if Jesus hadn't lived or if his life and teaching had been forgotten and I knew nothing about him?

Although the risen Jesus will soon reveal himself to the women, and they will realise that the Lord wasn't taken, we can easily find in our own lives that we can experience 'they have taken the Lord' moments. We will return to this theme later in the book, but some initial thoughts to indicate what I mean. For many years we have usually been part of our local Churches Together Good Friday March of Witness. Good Friday is the most solemn and sacred day of the Christian year. Until quite recently most of the shops were closed on Good Friday, the roads were almost empty and the pavements were deserted. It was very easy and safe for a large group to navigate from the church at one end of the high street to the church at the other end. Then Good Friday became just an ordinary bank holiday with the shops open; the roads and the pavements suddenly became busy.

For the first few years the police kindly escorted our procession so that we could walk along the high street with the traffic held back. After a few years the police decided they didn't have the resources to do this and we were on our own, caught between the shoppers on the high street and the patience or otherwise of the bank holiday drivers on the road. Witnessing to Jesus' death could sometimes involve reflecting upon our own mortality!

I mention this change of attitude to Christian festivals and practices as one example of a big change in recent decades. For the first three centuries after the resurrection, Christians were a persecuted marginalised minority. Then Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and Christians became a privileged group in society. This led to a very close relationship between church and state that we refer to as Christendom, where each affirmed and defended the other. When the Roman Empire ceased to exist, the European nation states continued to have this close relationship between church and state. Although there are some state occasions where the church has an important role, particularly centring on royal events, this strong relationship has weakened over recent decades, and Late Christendom or Post-Christendom are the terms often used to describe the current situation.

In the United Kingdom, the number of those who would identify as Christian continues to decline. Figures from about ten years ago would suggest that whilst about a third of the population could be described as churched, meaning that they had some contact with church and knowledge of Christianity; another third could be described as unchurched, having no meaningful contact with church or knowledge of Christian belief and practice; and the final third could be described as de-churched, being those who had originally had some contact and understanding, but no longer did so. We can all probably think about those from our own congregation who have lost their commitment to Jesus and who have drifted away. Given this recent rapid change in society, it is easy to feel that 'they have taken the Lord'.

We, too, can easily find ourselves missing the awareness of Jesus within society and the respect that there had been for Christians. It becomes easier to question our own Christian understanding and belief. As we try to make sense of Late Christendom we need to reassure ourselves that Jesus wasn't preparing his followers for Christendom, that wouldn't happen for another 300 years. In the post-resurrection

appearances, Jesus was preparing his followers to be part of the marginalised and persecuted pre-Christendom church. If we look afresh at these post-resurrection appearances, we should find that he will also help prepare us to recognise and follow him in an era when we might feel tempted to say that 'they have taken the Lord'.

Reflecting on the questions of what it would mean for you if Jesus hadn't risen and also if you had never heard anything about him, what are the implications for you when you affirm that Christ has risen?

Notes

1. Anglican Consultative Council, *Out of the Depths* (2016), p. 94.

2 Christ our Passover

The New Testament is rich in imagery, symbolism and parallels from the Old Testament. This is particularly true with the incarnation and Easter narratives. The events of Easter take place over the period of the Passover feast, so we are expecting these parallels. At Passover, with the symbolism of the blood of a lamb on the door posts, God freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. At Easter, with the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can say that through the blood of the Lamb, God frees us from the slavery of sin.

The imagery of Christ as our Passover is perfect. Writing this section during Easter week 2020, I am not surprised to find that the Old Testament readings in the lectionary for Morning Prayer are those telling of the Hebrew people escaping Pharaoh, and being led into the wilderness for 40 years. Today's reading was the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea (Exodus 14:15–31), which concludes with the words: 'So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.' For two different reasons, I feel very uncomfortable with the fact that the default canticle during the season of Easter, in the Church of England Morning Prayer, is the Song of Miriam, which reiterates and celebrates this slaughter of the Egyptians. First, the violent understanding of God revealed here doesn't sit easily with the God of love and forgiveness revealed in the life of Jesus, but this tension is too big an issue to try to address within one section of this book. Instead, I will focus upon my second reason.

For how long did the Hebrew people fear and believe in the Lord? I know that as I journey with the Hebrew people through the Exodus narrative, I will find plenty of occasions when they cease to believe in both Moses and the Lord and will be disobedient and complain bitterly.

I think that the sin that the Old Testament prophets speak out against most is idolatry. I know that the Hebrew people, as they journey through the wilderness, will decide that they want a more straightforward god, one made in their own image that reflects the world's values, rather than God's values, and they will then create and worship such a god in the form of a golden calf. Within the worldview of the time, victory is the total humiliation and annihilation of the enemy. The victory over the Pharaoh's army is victory in the world's eyes but, as far as believing in and fearing the Lord, it's a rather short-term victory.

Fortunately, in Morning Prayer, there are two alternative canticles provided. The refrain in the Song of Solomon affirms that 'many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it' (Song of Solomon 8:7). The victory here is the sacrificial love which cannot be quenched. The other canticle on offer is A Song of the New Creation which states, 'Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters' (Isaiah 43:16). This victory is the victory of eventual safety and a clear path to be followed. Both of these, I believe, give a more helpful perspective of the victory achieved through Jesus, our Passover, compared with the military-type victory of Exodus 14. Passover isn't an instant victory; instead it is a lengthy journey with obstacles, doubts and setbacks before reaching the promised land.

The 40 years in the wilderness, after the Passover, were when God prepared Israel for the promised land. Their thinking was much influenced by the ways of the world, and they were very happy to worship a worldly view. God gave them the Law to reorientate their perspective from the ways of the world to the ways of God. In our Christian imagery the wilderness is the place of discovery, as such it is also the place of temptation and wrestling with God and discovering God's will; the wilderness is the time of preparation for what follows. We see the parallel between Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, being prepared to enter the promised land, and Jesus' 40 days and nights in the wilderness after his baptism, preparing him for his public ministry. Based upon Jesus' wilderness experience we have the 40-day period of Lent as our preparation for Good Friday and Easter.

But if Christ is our Passover, I feel the need for another period of preparation. Just as Israel needed such a period of preparation to fully understand the meaning of Passover and prepare to enter the promised land, I need a period of preparation to better understand Christ as Passover and prepare for Ascension and Pentecost and a life without the presence of the physical Jesus. Jesus needed the preparation period to prepare him for his ministry. We need another preparation period to prepare us for our ministry.

As I journey with the disciples through the gospel accounts of Jesus' post resurrection appearances, I will see the same questioning and slowness to learn, the same tendency to try to create God in their own image and the same need for time to take on board what the new Passover is about and to be prepared for what life without the physical Jesus will mean; the need to be prepared for Pentecost and life after Pentecost. I believe that we, with the disciples, need a time of preparation and reflection to digest what the resurrection appearances are saying to us, who the resurrected Jesus is for us and what his resurrection really means for us.

The events at the tomb, on Easter Day, will present us with a long, slow unveiling of the mystery of Jesus' resurrection. Perhaps, there is a sense in which we want it to be immediate, so that we can exclaim that 'He is risen', and get on with eating our Easter eggs and resuming whatever it was that we gave up for Lent.

The events unveiled in the post-resurrection appearances contain a lot of uncertainty, doubt, questioning and a gradual coming to understanding and faith. We can feel that if we don't rush to shout, 'He is risen', then it is because we are a doubter and don't have enough faith. But I feel that if we rush too quickly to shout, 'He is risen', then it might be because we haven't fully grasped the full implications of what 'He is risen' means. Through the resurrection God has won the victory over sin and death, but victory is a concept that we usually try to understand in worldly term. We need to be able to see victory as God sees it. As Paul will go on to say:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

1 Corinthians 1:20-25

Apart from sin, what exactly do you feel that Jesus has freed you from?

3 He is risen

The most usual gospel readings for Easter Day are John 20:1–18 or Matthew 28:1–10. Both have the women visiting the tomb, finding it empty and meeting angels before meeting with Jesus himself who tells them to go and share the good news with the disciples. Before Jesus appears to Mary Magdalen in John's account, Mary goes back to the disciples to tell them of the empty tomb. John wins the race to get to the tomb first, but Peter is the one brave enough to first enter the empty tomb. The two disciples see nothing other than an empty tomb and the wrappings from Jesus' body. They return to their homes before Mary then meets with two angels who speak to her and she then speaks to a man. She assumes she is speaking to a gardener, but then realises that she is speaking to Jesus himself.

In both accounts Jesus has been met with and recognised and the good news of the resurrection has been shared by the women with the disciples. In our Easter services we can go ahead, without any doubt, to celebrate the good news of the resurrection and know that the good news has been shared, by the women, with the disciples. We can sing our great celebratory Easter hymns, but we don't need to ask whether the good news is being believed or not. We can leave such questions for a week when the gospel reading will probably be about Thomas not believing at first, but then seeing the risen Jesus himself. But did the disciples actually believe what the women shared with them that first Easter morning?

In answering this, it is helpful to look at the accounts in both Mark and Luke. Depending upon your Bible, you may well realise that we have a problem with the end of Mark's gospel. Most Bibles will explain that the original text ends with Mark 16:8 with the suggestion that Mark's concluding paragraphs have been lost. Some Bibles will offer two alternative endings. Although these replacement verses date back to about the time of Mark, New Testament scholars would argue that, because of their style and use of vocabulary and grammar, neither could have been written by Mark himself. As such, the final, added, verses of Mark might collaborate what another gospel is saying, but I wouldn't want to base any argument (such as not being hurt when picking up dangerous snakes, Mark 16:18) on verses that appear only in this added section of Mark.

Mark's original text ends after the angel has told the women that Jesus has risen and instructs them to tell the disciples to go and meet with Jesus in Galilee. But it concludes that they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. The longer and more usual added ending of Mark includes Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalen. She goes and tells the disciples about this appearance, but they would not believe her. In addition there is a reference to what must be Luke's road to Emmaus story, of Jesus appearing to two of them who had been walking in the country. These two go and tell the rest, but they don't believe them. It is only when Jesus appears to the eleven and upbraids them for their lack of faith and stubbornness that they believe.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus doesn't make an actual appearance until the story of the road to Emmaus. It is the angels at the tomb who explain that the tomb is empty because Jesus has risen. The women remember how Jesus had told them that this was all necessary and to go and tell the disciples, but these words appeared to the disciples as 'an idle tale and they did not believe them' (Luke 24:11). Peter did go to the tomb to explore what had happened. He looked into the empty tomb and saw the linen clothes and he went home amazed. The two that meet with Jesus on the road to Emmaus have obviously heard the women's account of the empty tomb and the message they had passed on from the angels, so by then there is some questioning, but no certainty. The certainty among the disciples only begins in Luke's gospel when those who saw Jesus at Emmaus report back to the disciples and find out that Jesus has also appeared to Peter (Luke 24:34).

In both Mark and Luke we read that the disciples did not initially believe the women's account; either of their meeting with Jesus or them seeing the angels and the message from the angels that they passed on. Returning to Matthew's account, nothing is said about how the disciples respond to the good news

that the women tell them. The disciples do go to Galilee and they do meet Jesus there. Again, with John's account no mention is made of how the disciples respond to Mary's message. We do read that on the evening of that day Jesus did reveal himself, within the locked room, to ten disciples (Thomas being absent), showing them his hands and his feet and they rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

The four gospel writers have written their accounts in different ways. We will be aware that they would have had different sources to base their accounts upon and that, by the time they were writing, they would be aiming their message at different groups of people, so any divergence in their accounts can be expected. A common factor within their accounts is the long, slow process that was involved in the disciples accepting the reality of the resurrection, and being able to declare, 'Christ is risen.'

I don't have any problem accepting the truth of the risen Jesus, but I do feel that the dawning of this truth was a gradual process, and all of the gospel writers are keen to make their readers aware of how gradual and tortuous the revelation of the truth was. The women need the appearance of the angels to begin to prepare them for the revelation of the risen Jesus. Then the women, full of excitement about the risen Jesus and the implications of this revelation, need to face frustration and rejection when their testimony is not accepted, but instead it is rejected as 'idle chatter'.

I feel as if on Easter Sunday, when we rush through the gospel accounts and listen to sermons about the victory that has been won, the gospel writers are saying to me, 'Slow down.' Take this amazing revelation slowly, so that you can really enter into and accept the real and deep significance of what you are hearing. I am reminded of a story told as an analogy of a man watching a butterfly come out of its cocoon. Seeing the beauty of the colouring of the butterfly's wings and its perfectly formed body, the man breathes on the cocoon to speed up the process. The butterfly suddenly emerges, spreads those wings in all of their glory, and dies; the process has been too fast for it to survive.

Perhaps with our faith we can sometimes make this happen too. If we reach the conclusion too soon, what we have concluded might not survive. The four gospel writers are taking us on a journey, a gradual discovery of an amazing truth. To digest that truth fully, we need to journey with the women and the disciples at their speed so that we enter into the different emotions and understanding, and gain the gradual realisation of what had happened and of the profound impact it would make upon them and the world. To fully digest that truth and the profound impact it makes upon us, we, too, might need to slow down and journey at a similar speed to the women and the disciples in reflecting on the events and their significance before we, together with all believers, affirm that Christ is risen.

Was your belief in the risen Jesus achieved quickly or was it a journey? What factors would you identify as having influenced your faith journey?

4 Angels, intimacy and awe

But before the meeting with the risen Jesus, the women will encounter the angels (Matthew 28:2–7; Mark 16:4–7; Luke 24:4–7; John 20:12–13). Angels also appear immediately after the ascension, so we find that angel appearances bookend the biblical chapters that we are considering. My mind struggles to conceptualise angels. Despite biblical descriptions, somewhere over the centuries they seem to have had a makeover. I wonder if it is the interchangeability of angels and fairies on top of the Christmas tree that has done it! The popular image of an angel has become female, young and attractive, with wings. In contrast, the biblical image is male, often scary and usually of indeterminate age, even though these angels that we will encounter in these verses will be described as young.

Some biblical angels were used to fight spiritual battles. The idea of a guardian angel suggests the physique of someone able to look after themselves as well as protect the person who they are guarding. Generally the first reaction to encountering angels seems to be fear, giving the impression that they might appear as a bit ‘heavy’ or thuggish, rather than beautiful. To be fair, the beginning of the makeover did seem to start quite early in history with the story, recorded by Bede,¹ that in 580AD Pope Gregory the Great saw some fair-haired and fair-skinned slaves in a slave market in Italy, and was told that they were Angles, that is, from what would become known as England. ‘Not Angles but angels,’ he replied. Angels, although still male, now seemed to be young, blue-eyed blonds.

The main biblical roles of angels appear to be spiritual fighters, guardians or messengers. There can also be a sense in which angels interpret the significance of the events. They are not just messengers, but also explain the deeper purpose of the message and the events which are unfolding. While the angels described in these verses do give messages and explanations, there is no real need for them to do so. Jesus is just out of sight and waiting to meet with the women himself. When we read about the angels after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:10), they also pass on a message but, again, it is a message that Jesus could have given the disciples himself. Both the angels announcing the resurrection and also confirming the ascension appear to be there mainly to mark a rite of passage in Jesus’ life. The same is true with those who announce the incarnation to the shepherds in the fields (Luke 2:8–14).

Finding it difficult to visualise angels, I find it helps me to consider them to be a bit like telegrams. Before a time when everyone had telephones in their homes, let alone computers and smart phones and instant access to texts and emails, the way of transmitting an urgent message was to use a telegram. I’ve only once sent a telegram; I had no other way of alerting a friend whom I was travelling to stay with that I would be arriving a couple of hours later than planned. As with the biblical accounts of angels used as messengers, the telegram caused great fear; she assumed that the only reason to receive a telegram would be because of bad news about a family member!

Telegrams are hardly used for urgent messages nowadays as we have more modern communication technology; perhaps the same thing has occurred with angels since the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We do still use greeting telegrams to mark certain rites of passage, such as births, weddings and anniversaries. I find it helpful to visualise the angels that mark Jesus’ incarnation, resurrection and ascension as being like greeting telegrams that are there to mark an important rite of passage. The presence of these angels shows us that both the resurrection and the ascension are there with similar significance to the incarnation itself, as we will discover as we explore further passages.

How many people witnessed the risen Christ? At the tomb we have two Marys in Matthew, two Marys and Salome in Mark and just Mary Magdalene in John. Luke adds Joanna and other women, but doesn’t have them seeing the risen Jesus, only the angels. Luke’s account of Jesus on the road to Emmaus mentions Cleopas and another follower; we also have Jesus meeting with the eleven disciples. I would be tempted to say that there were not more than 20 who saw Jesus. Paul, writing well after the events mentions the risen Jesus appearing to James (I assume this is the brother of the Lord) and more than

500 brothers and sisters (1 Corinthians 15:6). John mentions that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples (John 20:30) and that there are other things that Jesus did (John 21:25); although both statements are post-resurrection, we don't know if they refer to post-resurrection appearances or not, or are just part of his conclusion to his gospel.

We don't know the nature of these other appearances, but the appearances in the gospel accounts are small intimate interactions. Even with all eleven disciples present, the conversations with both Thomas (John 20:27–29), and later with Peter (John 21:15–23), are predominantly one-to-one conversations. Gone are the crowds, the teaching of the masses and the healings. We will read of a Jesus who knows what is going on within people's minds before they can utter the words themselves: a Jesus who knows the disciples better than they know themselves. We, too, are likely to sense a Jesus who wants to meet us intimately and will know us better than we know ourselves. It is good if our reading of these passages can encourage us into a closer, more intimate, relationship with Jesus, but there is always the danger that we lose sight of the sense of awe that the disciples experienced within all of the post-resurrection encounters.

It can become quite easy for us to take Jesus for granted and just expect him to be there ready and waiting for us. What we read in these passages is of a Jesus who surprises the disciples when he breaks into their lives again.

With the appearances at the tomb, the presence of the angels creates a sense of awe before Jesus can be identified and engaged with. When Jesus meets with the women in Matthew 28:9, they grasp his feet and worship him, and when Jesus appears before the disciples in Galilee (Matthew 28:17) they fall down before him and worship. Although we can look forward to our intimate times with Jesus, we are reminded that the first response to acknowledging Jesus in our presence should be awe, worship and a sense of expectancy.

How do you hold together the tension between the intimacy of your relationship with Jesus and the fact that any encounter with Jesus is an encounter with the living God?

Notes

1. 'History of the English Church and People', written in AD732

5 Fake news?

Although the term ‘fake news’ is a recent term, the concept has been around for thousands of years. Although they didn’t have the added benefit of social media to spread their story, we read in Matthew 28:11–15 that the priests and elders devised a plan to spread an alternative version of events – fake news – suggesting that the reason that the tomb was empty was because the disciples had taken away Jesus’ body. Understandably, they needed a large sum of money to spread the fake news, suggesting that the rich and powerful are in a better position to spread stories like this than the poor and marginalised.

Those who spread fake news tend to justify their claims by suggesting that their version of events is the true one, and that the other version of events, the truth, is the real fake news. As such, I need to try to step outside of my Christian interpretation of events and objectively make a decision about which version of events is true and which is false. Strangely, I find that it is when I read through the different gospel accounts, I conclude that no one could really make such a bad attempt in trying to put together such an inconsistent and unbelievable story as the four gospel writers!

In courtroom dramas, it is when all of the witnesses give exactly the same, well-rehearsed, account of events that you question whether this is really the truth, or whether the story has been fixed to try to make it more convincing. Different people do see events differently and will interpret things differently when they recount them to other people. Surely if the disciples were planning to present people with false propaganda, they could have done a far better job of it. I really feel that the combination of the four gospel accounts is so unbelievable that it must be true!

In all four gospel accounts it is the women who first encounter the empty tomb and it is the women who first meet with the risen Jesus. Within cultural norms and the legal system, a women’s word didn’t count for anything, and you needed seven male witnesses to prove something and give it credibility. If you wanted to give a believable bit of fake news, it wouldn’t have been too hard to have created a story that included seven or more male witnesses. Instead, God challenged the ways of the world by revealing the truth of the resurrection to the women: by making the first apostles, that is, those who are sent, women. God doesn’t write his truth to fit in with the ways of the world, but his truth was, and continues to be, deeply controversial.

The next question is why make the story as questionable as suggesting resurrection. If the story was that Jesus hadn’t really died, but was in a coma and was resuscitated, then it might have been believable. For one person to be resurrected from the dead was just as unbelievable for people in Jesus’ time as it is in our time. When Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will come back to life, she understands this as referring to the resurrection on the last day (John 11:24). Among the Jews of Jesus’ time, the Sadducees didn’t believe in resurrection, but the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the body; but resurrection was something that would happen to everybody at once as the end times began. Resurrection wasn’t for individuals; it was either for everybody at once or it was for nobody.

Then we have the question of the nature of Jesus’ resurrected physical body. The resurrected Jesus can come and go as he wishes and enters locked rooms. How recognisable was Jesus to those who knew him? On the Emmaus road Jesus is eventually recognised not because of his physical looks and his wounds, but in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:31). When the disciples were fishing and Jesus was standing on the beach in Galilee (John 21), they did not recognise Jesus physically. It was only when he told them to cast their net on the other side of the boat, and they caught too many fish to haul the net in, that some of them recognised him. Did Jesus really have the scars of crucifixion all of the time? He clearly did when he was revealed to Thomas and the other disciples in a locked room, but the scars weren’t the determining feature when he broke bread on the Emmaus road.

I have mentioned that Mark's original ending has been lost, but the other three gospels include different stories from each other. Luke has the Emmaus road and appearances in Jerusalem, Matthew has a brief account in Galilee and John has stories from both Jerusalem and Galilee. You would expect that if the gospel writers were trying to present us with fake news, they would have done a far better job of trying to present their readers with a consistent and believable account.

Interestingly, the early church did consider this. 'The temptation to construct one "master-narrative", or to use one gospel only, was very strong for the early church. The plurality of four gospels, four lives of Jesus, and hence four Christologies, was clearly a problem. Non-Christian critics like Celsus, Porphyry and Julian were quick to point out the differences; the mere existence of several accounts suggested that not one was perfect.'¹ Marcion suggested the exclusive use of Luke's gospel and Tatian a rewritten, integrated gospel from the existing four. Ultimately, the four gospel accounts were affirmed as appropriate for the canon of the Bible.

I assume by then the reality of the risen Christ, and the impact that belief in the risen Christ was making upon his followers, was so real and obvious that they had no need to try to unify the accounts of the four evangelists to convince anyone with a consistent story, but were able to confidently share the four different interpretations of events that the four evangelists had.

Personally, I find that the simplicity of the gospel narratives adds to my belief in their authenticity. Unlike Matthew and Luke's nativity accounts, there is no attempt to make connections with Old Testament prophecies. The apostle Paul, almost certainly writing his epistles before John wrote his gospel, interprets the significance of the resurrection to his readers. While John interprets significance in much of his gospel, there is no attempt to interpret the meaning of the post-resurrection appearances in these verses. Writing after the events, the gospel writers will often add meaning to their narrative accounts. None of the gospel writers attempts to do this with these resurrection narratives. All of the post-resurrection accounts come over as unprocessed eyewitness statements that were recorded at the time, rather than as interpretations that were developed at a later stage. Because the accounts feel raw and unprocessed I find them convincing, and so I believe that it was the priests and elders who were trying to spread fake news.

How do, or would, you respond if people suggested that the resurrection accounts aren't believable?

Notes

1. Richard Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus* (SPCK, 1994), p. 164.

6 Encountering Jesus

A common theme running through the Easter Day appearances is that people do not discover the risen Jesus; it is the other way around. In fact, the people involved often don't really believe that the risen Jesus is there to be discovered. It is the risen Jesus who unexpectedly reveals himself to the people, the revelation usually being a gradual one. With the appearances to the women at the tomb, the presence of the angels creates a sense of awe before Jesus can be identified and engaged with. On the road to Emmaus, the two followers will experience their hearts warming as they begin to recognise Jesus (Luke 24:32). When, a few verses later (Luke 24:37) Jesus appears to the apostles, they experience alarm and fright before experiencing joy. Jesus suddenly, and unexpectedly, begins to burst into their lives.

Understanding Christ as Passover reminds us of Moses and of his story. It is worth reflecting on how God suddenly breaks into Moses's life beside the burning bush (Exodus 3:3). In the Old Testament narrative prior to this revelation to Moses, God had appeared rather distant. Since after the time of Abraham, God had been in control of certain aspects of Israel's history; we see this in the story of Joseph and Jacob's family escaping the famine with the move to Egypt. It is also there in the story of how Moses' life is saved with the rush basket, but there hadn't really been any obvious revelation by God to his chosen people or real relationship between him and his people. God initially reveals himself to Moses through a sudden and unexpected experience of a bush that is burning, but not being consumed. It is after this experience of God that God reveals himself historically as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.

When Moses experiences God in the burning bush, Moses wants to know God's name. God identifies himself as I am. God says, 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3:14); Moses is then told to tell the Israelites that 'I am' has sent him. Instead of using a noun as his identity, God uses a verb; the verb that God chooses is about being. As well as identifying himself with being, God does so in the present tense. He doesn't name himself 'I was', or 'I will be'; God is the God of now, not just a God who existed in the past or might only be expected to be encountered at some point in the future; he is a God who is active now.

For me, this means that God is first encountered as the God of being and of now, and then to be understood as the historical God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The verb 'to know' means both knowledge, experience or relationship. The French use two different verbs for our English verb 'to know': *savoir*, which is head knowledge, and *connaître*, which refers to relationship. There is the danger that if we start with just head knowledge about God, we won't actually recognise him when we experience him.

We seem to have something similar going on with the post-resurrection appearances. Jesus is first experienced and, like the burning bush, the experience is an unexpected one that initially produces shock and awe, rather than instant recognition. The head knowledge about Jesus doesn't help his followers to be able to recognise the Jesus that they have experienced. It is only after Jesus is experienced that he is identified as Jesus. Those who meet Jesus need to make sense of their new experience in the light of their head knowledge about who Jesus is; but it is their experience which will drive this process.

We see something similar earlier in the gospels; the Pharisees, who had so much head knowledge about God, were unable to recognise that same God within the person of Jesus. I believe that this can still be true for us today. If we have narrowly defined who we believe Jesus to be, then we risk finding ourselves unable to recognise Jesus in today's world. In a rapidly changing world, we might expect that Jesus might be experienced in new ways.

Increasingly, we live in a society where people don't have the head knowledge about Jesus but where Jesus still makes himself known in people's experiences. We need to be open to recognising Jesus in

other people's experiences, and in our own, and then relate the Jesus who is experienced to the Jesus that we have head knowledge about.

Jesus appears suddenly and unannounced into the lives of those who witness him. Although there is no special formula to make this happen for us, I think the passages we have looked at give hints as to how it might become more likely. The women who had gone to the tomb had gone there to serve Jesus; both Mark and Luke explain that they had gone to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body. We could also suggest that this dedication to him and his memory was a form of worship. The two followers who Jesus reveals himself to on the road to Emmaus are discussing Jesus, who he was and what his purposes were, when Jesus meets with them. I would suggest that although Jesus might break into people's lives in any way at any time, it is when we are worshipping Jesus, serving Jesus and discussing Jesus that we are more likely to put ourselves closer to him and be in a position where he can break into our lives.

Having said that, I feel that it begs the question of whether we do any of these actions with the expectancy that we might actually encounter Jesus in the process. Do we worship Jesus, serve Jesus or read the Bible and discuss Jesus with any real sense of expectancy and anticipation that Jesus will reveal himself to us in new ways? If Jesus is going to break into our lives in new and exciting ways, we need to first offer up these potential meeting places to God in prayer and then enter into these experiences with a sense of awe and expectancy.

**Is the Jesus that you experience always the same as the Jesus that you have read/heard about?
How do you hold the two together?**

Part 2: Doubt and belief

1 Thomas the twin

Before considering, and making sense of, John's account of Thomas and the risen Jesus (John 20:24–29), it is worth considering what we know about Thomas before and after this event. Thomas is known as the twin; in fact, the name 'Thomas' means twin, and his real name was Judas. There are two pre-crucifixion mentions of Thomas, apart from him being one of the twelve. One is found in John 11. Jesus and the disciples had gone across the Jordan, 'to the place where John had been baptising earlier' and remained there (John 10:40–42). Here Jesus hears that Lazarus has taken ill and, later, died, and Jesus decides he needs to go to Judea to 'wake Lazarus from his sleep'. The disciples remind Jesus that there had been attempts to stone and kill him there last time he went. When Jesus insists on going anyway, it is Thomas who says to the other disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

The second reference is John 14:5 when, in response to Thomas's question about not knowing where Jesus is going, Jesus responds that he is 'the way and the truth and the life' and goes on to say, 'If you know me you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him'. We never hear in the gospels, or Acts, again about Thomas after the John 20:24–29 account.

Strangely, Christian tradition has left us with twin understandings of Thomas, and they are far from being identical twins. In the western church he is defined by his initial doubt that Jesus had risen and his one contribution to Christianity, and the world in general, is to become the person that the term 'doubting Thomas' is based upon. The bravery of his willingness to go with Jesus to Judea and face the likelihood of death with Jesus is forgotten and he is forever remembered as a doubter.

As the early church developed and spread in the Roman Empire it became focused initially around four centres – Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch (Syria) and Alexandria (Egypt); later Constantinople would become another centre. Thomas is particularly associated with the Syrian branch of the church. Church history gives interesting insights into the nature of the church that Thomas founded. According to tradition, Thomas took the gospel to India and was allegedly martyred at St Thomas Mount, in Chennai, on 3 July 72AD, and his body was interred in Mylapore. Whether this is factually true, we don't know, but we do know that Thomas's followers did establish churches in India in the first or second centuries. When western missionaries 'took the gospel' to India during the colonial expansion, they discovered that the Syrian Orthodox were well established in India, especially in Kerala, and had survived and thrived as a small minority in a Hindu and Muslim country.

After Constantine's death, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Constantinople became the main centre of Christianity. Christian leaders were free to travel to meet at what were known as Ecumenical Councils. This was an opportunity to establish doctrines and to formulate creeds, but was also an opportunity to disagree and create schism. In the Nicene Creed we affirm that Jesus was both fully God and fully Man, at the same time. The differences in doctrinal understanding probably weren't that great, but it was the Greek and Latin speakers, at the centre of the Roman Empire, who held power linguistically, economically and politically and there were two different schisms which meant that only Rome and Constantinople, at the heart of Roman Empire, were seen as the true church.

Two of the churches that were marginalised by these processes were the Assyrian Church of the east, centred in Persia, and the Syrian Orthodox Church, both of whom looked to Thomas as their founder. Being churches that were religious minorities within their home countries, they found that no longer being associated with the Roman Empire was generally a very positive factor. The Assyrian Church of the

east expanded east and took the gospel to China, establishing a church there that adjusted well to Chinese culture and survived for many centuries before being eventually being wiped out. The Syrian Orthodox Church, as well as establishing the church in its region and India also appears to have been instrumental in establishing the church in Ethiopia.

If we look at the history of Christian mission, we generally find that Christianity has been spread by the powerful. Initially there was the growth of the Roman Empire and a history of countries invading and occupying and dominating other countries. European colonial expansion took the church to the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania. The gospel was spread through military power and also by economic power. In contrast the Syrian and Persian Christians established their churches through being minorities, often persecuted minorities, who tried and succeeded to embed their lives and witness within their host community. These churches have a history of living alongside other faiths: Hinduism in India, Islam in the Middle East and Central Asia and the Eastern faiths in China. Often persecuted, they persevered and continued to witness. As Christianity is so closely associated with the west, the growth of organisations such as Al Qaeda and Daesh have had a devastating impact upon Christians in Iraq and Syria, but Syrian Orthodox communities continue to live out their faith in these areas.

We don't know about Thomas's teaching to his followers, but we do know that the churches that look to him as their founder are the ones that seem to have got to the heart of what the incarnation was about: embedding themselves within other communities and living out and witnessing to God's love, revealed in Jesus. They have also got to the heart of what happened through the cross and Jesus' resurrection and put into practice the fact that God's power is most strongly revealed through human weakness.

Whatever the doctrinal differences really were, I am sure that the example of Thomas's bravery in agreeing to go with Jesus to Judea, and the later example of Thomas's followers, and their incarnate and sacrificial witness, was a real spiritual challenge to the power and authority of the church of the Roman Empire. Perhaps the way that more powerful churches have avoided facing up to that challenge is by finding it easier to just remember Thomas as 'Doubting Thomas'.

What experiences do you have of God's power being revealed through human weakness?

2 Touch the wounds

Given that the churches that saw Thomas as their founder were later caught up with controversies related to Jesus being both fully God and fully human, it seems fair to ask which nature of the risen Jesus was it that Thomas didn't believe in? I wonder if part of the problem lay in the fact that Jesus had appeared to the other ten disciples in a locked room. If a group of your friends told you that they were in a locked room and someone you knew, whom you believed was dead, had suddenly appeared in front of them, would you assume that they had seen a physical person or seen a ghost? On the other hand, if they described seeing the latch lift and the door being opened from outside, then you would be more inclined to believe that it was a physical presence that they had seen.

The disciples had all seen and believed Jesus' miracles. There is evidence in the gospels that they had begun to see Jesus as being God in some way. What they hadn't expected was that Jesus, who in some way was God, could suffer and die in agony, in such a human way, on the cross. Perhaps it was the human nature of Jesus, the Jesus who had suffered and died as a human, that Thomas struggled to believe in. If so, I can empathise with him. I don't have a problem with the Jesus who can do miraculous things and answer prayer and show that he is God. But I sometimes struggle with the Jesus who doesn't seem to show these divine abilities when I would expect him to, and want him to; with the Jesus who seems to not only allow suffering and death but also appears to enter into it, and take it upon himself.

When I feel like this, I am sure that Jesus' answer to me is the same as his response to Thomas, to 'touch the wounds'. In the west we live in a world where we expect things to get better. When they don't, or when bad things happen, we easily say, 'Why did God allow that to happen?' In contrast we usually find that in parts of the world where bad things usually happen, and where things can be expected to get worse, people find it far easier to believe in God. In the face of adversity we in the west will often respond by saying that we don't trust God. In the parts of the world where so many bad things happen, people often conclude that they can't trust other ethnic groups, or governments or other countries; the only person that they can trust is God. The history of the church often shows that it is in suffering and persecution that faith develops and the church grows. During the cultural revolution in China, when Chinese Christians were cut off from the west, there was huge growth in the number of Christians. Similarly there was growth in the number and commitment of Christians in Southern Sudan during the Sudanese civil war. Late in the second century, during a time of severe persecution, Tertullian summed up this phenomenon by saying that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'.

The experience is that in times of pain and despair, people sense that Jesus is there alongside them. Jesus is the one who entered into our humanity through his incarnation; the one whose parents found there was no room for him at the inn; who escaped persecution by fleeing as a refugee to Egypt. Jesus is the one who had comments made about his legitimacy; who was rejected by the religious authorities, before suffering and dying on a cross. Jesus is the one who is experienced as the one who draws near to those who are marginalised, persecuted and suffering. It is this Jesus, that those who suffer feel is able to understand their situation and enter into their situation with them; they believe this because they know that Jesus, himself, has had similar experiences.

Like many of us, I am squeamish about medical things and don't like looking at wounds. I find that when I sense Jesus telling me to touch the wounds I want to look away and think of nice things instead. But Jesus says to touch the wounds, and it is only when we obey and draw alongside those who are wounded and suffering that we can begin to see Jesus at work amongst the pain and dirt and squalor; this is because we are allowed to see Jesus through the eyes and experiences of those who are suffering. It is only when we enter into that suffering that we can really see and experience the humanity of Jesus at work. It might not be the physical healing that we want to see that is happening, but Jesus will be there sharing in the pain and suffering, and there can be healing of relationships and of hopes and aspirations.

It is the Jesus who became incarnate to enter into our humanity who calls us to follow his example of being incarnate.

It is when I allow myself to touch the wounds that I can enable Jesus to heal some of my misunderstandings. Jesus doesn't want us to stand as a bystander, keeping our distance, but he wants us to follow his example of incarnation. His response to the doubts that we might have is not to keep a safe distance and to look away, but enter with him into the suffering. So when I, like Thomas, have doubts, then I too need to more deeply engage with Jesus' humanity and accept Jesus' invitation to touch the wounds. It is in doing so that we see the real power of God at work in human weakness and vulnerability. It seems to be this ability to 'touch the wounds' that lies behind the witness of the churches which look to Thomas as their founder.

Interestingly, Thomas' response to meeting with Jesus, and being invited to touch the wounds, is to declare that Jesus is 'My Lord and my God'. In saying this, Thomas appears to be the first person to actually recognise Jesus as God and declare him to be God. The lesson from John 14:7, that 'if you know me you will know my Father', clearly was understood by Thomas in recognising the risen Jesus, and was affirmed by Thomas.

What experiences do you have of recognising Jesus through 'touching the wounds', of seeing God at work within human pain and sorrow?

3 Doubt and faith

Doubt is the overriding theme that runs through the post-resurrection accounts. Those at the empty tomb experience doubt. With Jesus' final appearance to the disciples in Matthew's gospel, when he gives the Great Commission, we read of the disciples worshipping Jesus, but some doubted (Matthew 28:17). Thomas, having been absent when Jesus appeared to the other disciples in the locked room, doubted the account of these disciples and wanted physical proof himself of Jesus's resurrection. For this reason he gets the reputation for doubting, but doubt seems to have been the initial reaction of most of Jesus' followers.

We are tempted to see doubt as being the opposite of faith. It is not. Doubt is the opposite of certainty and certainty in one perspective is the barrier to faith developing in a different perspective. Being open to doubt is a necessary step in the journey of growing to a mature faith. The only way that we can come to faith in anything is to lose our certainty in our previous way of looking at things. For that to happen, we need to be able to doubt the initial viewpoint. All of us try to make sense of the world as we understand it. This way of understanding the world is our 'worldview'. Our worldview is shaped by our knowledge and our experiences and very much by the community that we are part of, so that usually we would expect to find that our worldview resonates with, although is not necessarily identical to, the worldview of other people that we relate to.

For our worldview to change, we need first to understand an alternative worldview and then realise that this alternative worldview makes more sense to us than our original worldview. This can usually only happen when we see that those who hold this alternative worldview have something about their worldview, and the outworking of that worldview, that we don't have and which appeals to us and inspires us. Moving from one worldview to another worldview means taking the step of faith to leave one community of belief behind and seek to become part of another community of belief. Taking this step of faith usually lies beyond mere knowledge, but will require some form of 'nudge'. Usually, when we are speaking of someone becoming a Christian, or significantly changing their Christian understanding, we would refer to this 'nudge' as being convicted by the Holy Spirit. Often when we explore how someone has been convicted by the Spirit in this way, we discover that there has been prayer involved, often prayer over a period of time. Let us consider some biblical examples of how this works.

The example that comes from these post-resurrection verses, although it is clearly pre-Holy Spirit, is the encounter on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). Jesus meets with the two followers, who were discussing the events of his death, and joins and walks along with them. Their worldview includes the hope that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel (v. 21). By this they primarily mean free Israel from Roman occupation; Jesus needs to present them with an alternative worldview. He does this by explaining that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then enter into his glory (v. 26), then beginning with Moses (that is, the first five books of the Old Testament) and all of the prophets (referring to both the historical books of the Old Testament and the prophets) he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. It is sad that Luke does not give us details of this overview of the Old Testament, but the church in its liturgies, especially for Lent, Passiontide and Easter, has identified many of these references for us.

The two followers walking on the road have already shared with Jesus that some in their community were beginning to believe that Jesus might have risen (vv. 22–24). There was potentially a community available for them to belong to with this new worldview. But there was still the need for the 'nudge'. The nudge is not immediate; although they walk with Jesus they do not recognise him. The nudge occurs when Jesus breaks bread and their eyes are opened and they are aware, as they say, of their 'hearts burning within us' (v. 32). Often, as suggested here, the process of recognition is not an immediate one, but it will take time for the different factors to come together and recognition to occur and for a move from one worldview to another.

Another example of the move from one worldview to a Christian worldview, which mentions eyes being opened, is the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–22). This event has given us the term a ‘Damascus Road’ conversion, implying a sudden and immediate occurrence. I wonder. Although the nudge factor, the light from heaven flashing around him accompanied by the voice, is sudden, we know that Saul had been persecuting Christians since the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:8–8:1). Saul had heard Stephen presenting an alternative worldview (Acts 7) and heard Stephen forgive his killers. Saul is part of the further persecutions and would have witnessed how those with a Christian worldview lived out this faith in the risen Jesus. A different worldview had been presented to him; he witnessed the impact of this worldview upon the lives of its followers and was aware of an alternative community of faith that existed. I imagine that there was a struggle between head and heart that had been going on for a while. Paul’s head had a Jewish worldview, but his heart was being increasingly exposed to a Christian worldview. When the nudge occurred on the Damascus Road, the impact was immediate.

These passages show us how faith came about in biblical times, but also help us to understand conversion in our own day and age. For people to come to a Christian faith, the same stages will be necessary. The final stage will be the ‘nudge factor’; it is the Holy Spirit that will convict someone in their faith, not us. Our part in encouraging the ‘nudge factor’ will include prayer; often this requires prolonged prayer over a period of time.

If someone, or a group, is going to move from seeing their worldview as the only worldview that makes sense, to also seeing our worldview as making sense then, as well as sharing our worldview with them, we will need to understand their worldview and understand the differences. This isn’t a superficial exercise; it involves real listening and understanding. We might find that the same vocabulary is being used, but words have quite different meanings. It isn’t about point scoring, or trying to show that we are right; it is about sensitive listening and trying to enter into their perspective.

There will also be the need for there to be a community of Christian believers that the person might feel attracted to join. This means a community of believers who are open and welcoming to other people and who share a lifestyle, based upon their faith, which is attractive to other people; a lifestyle that appears to put belief into practice and shows that belief gives people purpose and joy in their lives; a Christian community which reflects Jesus’ love and is able to ‘walk the talk’.

As well as prayer for the person or people, there needs to be prayer for the Christian community that it is able to reflect the love of Jesus and prayer for those who will be involved in listening, understanding and speaking that they will be able to hold on to the hope within them and sensitively witness.

Given the understanding of conversion, given above, how can you and your church help enable the Holy Spirit bring people to faith in the risen Jesus?

4 Growth

When Jesus reveals himself to Mary Magdalene beside the empty tomb (John 20:17), he says to her ‘Do not hold on to me.’ All of us, when we have a powerful experience of Jesus, are tempted to try to hold on to this experience. The story of the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–9) gives a strong hint of this. Peter’s first response to the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and the transfiguration of Jesus, is to want to build three dwellings. We can all be tempted to want to hold on to Jesus and enshrine specific memories and experiences and worship these. God makes clear with the transfiguration account that the important thing is to remember that Jesus is God’s chosen one and to listen to him, not to enshrine specific memories which stop us from continuing to listen to Jesus. Jesus then leads the disciples down the mountain, where they experience a new kind of challenge that his disciples had been unable to respond to (Matthew 17:14–16). We can easily be tempted to try to hold on to Jesus and to particular experiences of him. In contrast, Jesus tends to want to move us on and reveal new things to us.

We find the same thing at the end of the account of the road to Emmaus. As soon as the two followers recognise Jesus, he vanishes from their sight (Luke 24:31). In the pre-resurrection gospel accounts, Jesus moves smoothly from one place to another. In the post-resurrection accounts he suddenly appears and disappears; he breaks into a situation and reveals himself in new ways when no one is really expecting him, then vanishes. In the post-resurrection appearances, Jesus was preparing his disciples to be able to recognise and respond to him in different situations, rather than to hold on to the previous appearance and expect the next appearance to be similar to the last appearance. We live in a rapidly changing world and so, even more, we need to be able grow and develop in our faith by discovering Jesus in the unfamiliar; in new, different and challenging experiences.

Another example of the move from one worldview to another helps illustrate this. In the story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18), the conversion of Cornelius and his family starts with Cornelius’ prayers (10:2), but his worldview is changed by listening to Peter’s explanation (10:34–43) and the nudge factor is the Holy Spirit falling on all who heard the word (10:44). The fact that the Holy Spirit fell upon the whole of Cornelius’ household, and Peter ordered them all to be baptised, meant that there was a new Christian community, who Peter then gave further instruction to. In the west we very much emphasise personal faith, but in many places life is far more communal and decisions are far more communal, and in Acts we get used to seeing families and communities coming to faith together. The story of the conversion of Cornelius’s household fits the usual pattern of events for those coming to faith mentioned in the previous section, but also introduces us to a story which could be described as the conversion of Peter and, subsequently, of the conversion of the church.

At the beginning of this account, Peter has what is primarily a Jewish worldview. This would include the assumption that God’s purposes are for the Jewish nation and that Gentiles lie outside of God’s purposes. The only way around this would be for a Gentile to first of all convert to Judaism. We also see in Peter’s vision (10:9–16) that he firmly accepted the Jewish food laws. As well as meaning that certain foods were considered profane or unclean, this would mean that Peter could not offer hospitality to, or receive hospitality from, a Gentile. The first nudge that Peter receives is referenced in Acts 9:43, when we are told that Peter stays with Simon a tanner. Tanners work with the skins of dead animals, so the house would have been considered as ritually unclean. The second nudge is when Peter is told to kill and eat and not consider anything that God has made clean as profane (10:13–16). This all modifies Peter’s worldview enough for him to offer hospitality to Cornelius’s men and then to receive hospitality from Cornelius.

The final, and biggest, nudge comes when Cornelius’s household have heard Peter’s words. They appeared to be accepting what Peter had said and Peter must have been wondering what he should do next. Surely he would now need to convert them to Judaism. But no; the Holy Spirit was poured upon them and the proof of this was that they began to speak in tongues. Peter is forced to realise that Gentiles

could become Christians without first converting to Judaism (Acts 10:44–48). God’s powerful message is that when we are involved in sharing faith with others we can’t just expect their worldview to change, but we must be open to the fact that our own worldview might change as well.

This isn’t just a one-off historical example. When I share my worldview with someone who is also sharing their worldview with me, then, if we are both being open, I need to take on board what their worldview says to me. In such situations, I need to be open to God’s nudge. If someone share their hesitations and doubts with me, or shares their previous religious experiences, then I need to take these seriously and be open to the fact that my worldview might need modifying. I need to enter into such conversations with faith that I will be aware of the Holy Spirit’s nudge that will, in time, move my understanding to a new, and possibly broader, one that gives me a deeper understanding of God and his purposes.

But this process doesn’t stop there. Peter has gained a new and deeper understanding of God’s purposes but this needed to be shared with the wider church. It sounds very straightforward in Acts 11:1–18. This is helped by the fact that Peter was accompanied by six brothers (Acts 11:12) so that there were seven male witnesses to the events. This was enough to legally prove the case. We know from Acts 15 and Paul’s comments in his epistle to the Galatians that the matter wasn’t resolved as easily as this, but it was eventually resolved. Coming to faith requires people to doubt their previous worldview before accepting a new worldview, but might also have repercussions that mean that we need to doubt and then review and modify our own worldview to move to a new understanding and that this, in turn might lead to the church needing to move to a new understanding. Such changes can take a long time and it is important that all concerned are open to sensitive and prayerful listening and understanding.

Thinking of your own experiences of growing in your faith, what have you needed to let go of in order to gain a new understanding of your faith? Did any of these have implications for you in relating to other Christians?

5 I have believed

Writing this, it is understandable that I find myself forced to re-evaluate why I believe. I have argued that the nudge factor of the Holy Spirit is essential to convince us of the reality of the risen Christ, so perhaps it isn't surprising that my conviction doesn't come directly from any of the post-resurrection accounts, but comes from the verses that just come shortly afterwards. In the account of the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) we read about how those frightened disciples, who had felt the need to hide behind locked doors in Jerusalem, are transformed into those who are brave enough to witness to their faith in the risen Jesus. This transformation of who they have become, and their willingness to suffer and to die for their faith, is a theme that constantly runs through the whole of the Acts of the Apostles. In response to these accounts, I could do no other than to say that I believe.

I am also privileged to have seen the same transformation in many people's lives and this has been a great encouragement to nurture and develop my faith. Yes, I have also seen attitudes and behaviour among Christians that I do not feel is at all appropriate or Christian, but this can't detract from the very real witness I have seen in so many whose lives have been turned around by their faith in the risen Jesus. I also feel that within my own Christian journey I have needed to learn to not hold on to specific encounters with Jesus and to be able to let go and be prepared to recognise him afresh in different situations. As ever, recognition isn't always immediate and there has been the need to let go of a partial revelation in order to grasp the bigger and deeper revelation that Jesus wants to offer me.

During my formative teenage years, in the mid-1960s, our family worshipped at a Presbyterian church, in a middle-class area of West London. The majority of the congregation were exiles from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. As with other United Kingdom exiles, there was a tendency to be more patriotic than your compatriots who had remained in their home country! Our minister was a powerful Welsh preacher. Despite the Welsh Rugby team never being mentioned in any biblical text, it did appear very often within his sermons and you could be forgiven for wondering whether he loved the Welsh rugby team more than he loved Jesus – until one particular sermon.

It was the height of apartheid in South Africa, not so many years after the Sharpeville massacre and the white South African rugby team was in the United Kingdom playing, and generally beating, the home nations. The match where Wales beat South Africa had been televised on the Saturday and you knew that the Welsh rugby team would feature strongly in the sermon; but not in the way that we expected. Our minister shared the anguish that he had experienced as he had wrestled with his conscience and concluded that as a Christian he could not watch that match on television. It was a long, eloquent sermon, but the heart of it was that he believed in a God who had made all people in his image and apartheid was a denial of this fundamental truth and that Christians needed to take a stand against this evil. I began to be introduced to a Jesus who challenged some of my middle-class values and showed me that being a Christian meant making choices and not all choices would be simple ones.

A few years later, at Nottingham University, I was on the fringe of the local campaign of the Stop the Seventies Tour. The South African cricket team was due to tour England that summer and one of the test matches was scheduled for Trent Bridge. That national campaign was successful, and the tour was cancelled. There was a realisation that people could change things and, among Christians, a realisation that Christians could be involved in changing things. Nottingham was, for me, the time of beginning to encounter and recognise the incarnate Jesus. If you asked me when did I become a Christian, how should I answer? I don't remember a time when I didn't consider myself as a Christian, but it was at Nottingham that I first made decisions about what my faith really meant to me. It was at Nottingham that I first saw that my faith had implications for me that were different from the Christian understanding that I had inherited.

From Nottingham I moved to a Christian community house in Rochdale. We lived in an inner-city, multi-racial area which faced typical inner-city challenges. Many of the Christian population had moved out of the inner areas and churches were declining or closing. As well as our day jobs we endeavoured to work out, and live out, what it meant to be an incarnate Christian presence in that area. Through members of that community, working with others, an adventure playground was brought into being. There were initiatives with Asian young people from both Pakistan and East Africa, those recently expelled from Uganda, and also initiatives to try to break down barriers and create understanding between the Asian and indigenous populations. We also started a Christian–Muslim–Marxist dialogue group. When a commercial hostel for homeless men closed, we were involved in a temporary response that led to a new permanent facility being developed and we often put up people for social services when they had run out of temporary accommodation and spent our evening being caring, listening hosts.

We saw death and decay; we experienced both the painful realities of inner-city life and also witnessed the joy and hope that the new life that the incarnate Jesus could bring into such situations. We made career choices and we made lifestyle choices. We developed liturgies to express our experiences of pain, joy and hope; both for our own internal use, and also for a wider, local, worshipping community that joined us for a monthly service and we engaged with others in similar initiatives in other inner-city areas. We didn't see ourselves as natural evangelists, but those who lived in the inner-city area and others working with these inner-city issues would ask what we were doing and what motivated us. In openly responding to these questions, we often found that we were speaking of Jesus and the hope within us. Very clearly, I could affirm that I believed.

What were the key elements involved in you first coming to faith? What, if any, difficult choices did you find yourself needing to make?

6 I believe

Through both a celebration and also a farewell to a dying friend, I recently met up with some from that era of being involved in incarnate mission in Rochdale and other inner cities. I admire the way that some, compared to me, have stayed so committed to living in the inner-city areas and to the lifestyle choices that they made back then, but also realised that the incarnate Jesus is no longer a central part of the picture for all of us. I realised that I have seen this losing focus on Jesus at other times in my life; both as a student and within Christian organisations. It is possible that when we get the opportunities to create exciting, focused, Christian worship, with other like-minded people related to particular interests, projects or work, then that can tend to replace church. If that happens, then it can become far harder to find Jesus in the more ordinary worship of a local church. If we are worshipping with people who don't share that same focused vision, then, if we are not rooted in the wider church, some might find it easy to lose sight of Jesus. I feel that I have been fortunate to find and recognise Jesus in different ways over the years.

In Quaker worship I could continue to worship with people who thought like me on certain issues, but I also experienced Jesus in the corporate silent worship and became aware of the Holy Spirit as a silent communicator when, so often, we realised after an hour's silence that we had all been led in similar ways. Anglican liturgy gave a more formal structure and direction to that sense of listening and Jesus could be encountered in different ways as I became familiar with the different seasonal liturgies and Jesus could be experienced within the sacraments. Anglican worship also meant experiencing Jesus in other people, who were different to me, as I allowed myself to meet Jesus outside of the bubble of people who thought and acted like me.

Interviewing people about their faith and calling, for one of the Anglican mission agencies, meant taking seriously the Jesus who had revealed himself to other Christians. I didn't always initially feel comfortable with the Jesus I was encountering in other people's lives, but Jesus was patient with me and allowed me to gradually grow and broaden in my faith. Through interviewing, I met with the Jesus who could answer prayer, forgive sins and heal past hurts within other people's lives; the Jesus who could answer my prayers, not necessarily in the way that I had hoped, forgive and heal past hurts in my life if I asked him to. Not so much letting go of who Jesus had been, but grasping the bigger picture of who he could become, for me, if I allowed him to do so.

Through reading about Jesus in the gospels, and becoming familiar with liturgy, I could discover more about God the Father that Jesus reveals to his disciples and to us. I could also discover more about the Holy Spirit who was sent to his church by the Father at the request of the Son at Pentecost and found I could better understand and experience God as Trinity. Through trying to make sense of what Jesus might have revealed to the disciples on the road to Emmaus when, 'beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures', I started to learn how to view the Bible as a whole, instead of as a mixture of bits that I felt comfortable with and bits I felt uncomfortable with.

Through this I learnt to see the Bible as the story of God's plans for salvation for his whole world. I realised that the Bible starts with God affirming the goodness of his creation (Genesis 1:31) before the narratives of the rebellion of human beings (described in Genesis 3–11) which led to the breakdown of relationships between God and people, people with each other, God, people and creation and people with themselves. The Bible then ends with the vision of the new creation (Revelation 21–22); of heaven coming down to earth and fallen creation being renewed and restored. In between, told in a variety of writing styles which include narrative, history, parable, poetry, praise, prophecy and letters, we have the account of God taking the initiative in restoring these broken relationships to bring the whole of fallen creation back into full relationship with God. With that overview, I could learn how to discover God's purposes in the sections of the Bible I had previously tried to ignore.

Through ecumenical involvement, I could discern the insights about Jesus that I had not seen before within my own denominational traditions. Through getting to know Christians from other cultures, I could begin to identify which parts of my understanding of Jesus were cultural, rather than authentic. I realised that at the local, national and global level, I could only really recognise Jesus by being part of his body on earth that we call the church, which tries to live out the new life promised by Jesus. In conversations with those of other faiths and worldviews I found myself answering questions, either posed by them or that were formulated in my own mind, about the nature of the Trinitarian God that I believed in and found myself seeing aspects of Jesus that I had not been aware of before.

In the period during which I have believed in Jesus, I have become increasingly aware of how Christianity and Christian thinking have become marginalised in our society. Taking Jesus out of our national worldview and understanding the increased separation between church and state has not always been a comfortable experience, but it had made it easier to recognise what is authentically of Jesus and what was just part of our prevailing Christendom culture. In the same way that the experience of exile for the Jewish people was an opportunity to really work out who God was and his purposes for his people, I believe that the current challenges that the church faces are an opportunity for us to clarify our identity as Christians and the purposes that God has in mind for us.

I don't see my own encounters with Jesus being any sort of role model, or pattern, for how others should meet with him, but I do feel, within a rapidly changing world, that my faith has benefitted from the opportunities to recognise, and meet with, the risen Jesus in a variety of different ways. From these experiences, and in the hope that this will continue, I can say that I believe.

As I read the gospels, I often notice that the disciples are asking Jesus the wrong questions, and for them to fully understand him he needs to show them that their question is wrong. At some point in my spiritual journey I realised that the question of whether or not I believe was the wrong question. The real question was whether or not God believes in me. This has enabled me to look back at my strengths and weaknesses and realise that, despite all of my weaknesses and failings, God has found tasks for me to do; I realise that I am experiencing a God who believes in me and is able to use me for his purposes.

This might sound rather egocentric, but reflects the fact that it is not just about our own searching; it is also about God seeking us out. The post-resurrection appearances are about Jesus seeking out his disciples and taking the initiative to appear to them and them being open to recognise him in those situations. It is my understanding that the God who can be experienced in this way, rather than just reflected upon, gives me a far stronger sense of belief than the head level understanding that I might have. It is because I have experienced God at work in my life, challenging and shaping me, as I have attempted to follow him; a God who seems to persevere with me, despite my own self-doubts, that I can confidently say that I believe.

What have been the subsequent 'conversions' or developments within your faith journey?

Part 3: Galilee

1 Galilee of the disciples

Galilee is where Jesus says that he will meet with his disciples (Matthew 27:10b; Mark 16:7; Luke 24:6). I find that when we think of Galilee, there are a number of projections we may wish to impose upon the place. These projections might come out of our experience or they might come from romantic perceptions we may have about the biblical Galilee; perceptions which are built upon only knowing part of the story, or having a vision of an area that is trapped in a time warp.

Upper Galilee was known as Galilee of the Gentiles (Isaiah 9:1). The original Jewish population had been taken into exile by the Assyrians and by Jesus' time different people groups had moved into the area. Although Jewish people had repopulated the area a century or two before Jesus' time, and there had been some forced conversions of people to Judaism, there were also likely to be a mixture of Phoenicians, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites and Palestinians. By the first century AD, it was part of the Roman Empire and there were 15 fortified cities in Galilee; Sepphoris, although not mentioned in the gospels, was one such cosmopolitan city just three and a half miles away from Nazareth that was probably being built when Jesus lived in Nazareth. Given that the term 'carpenter' could apply to the whole construction industry, it is possible that Jesus, with Joseph, was involved in its construction. To the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea, Galilee was where you met with the other nations and religions. There were also Jewish people but these would include some who might be described as Jews, but whose faith was only skin deep, hiding the folk religion from a previous faith allegiance.

But for the disciples, meeting Jesus in Galilee, more than anything else, meant meeting Jesus in the 'here and now'. Galilee was the place where they had lived and belonged; where their families were. Galilee was not only home, but it also meant going back to the day job; the place where many of them fished for a living.

For us, too, it is in the 'here and now' of our homes and our jobs where we should expect Jesus to meet with us. This is where Jesus will expect us to live out our Christian lives. We will look forward to meeting Jesus on a Sunday morning when we worship with the congregation that we belong to. We might look forward to meeting with Jesus within a spiritual retreat at a retreat centre, or as we enjoy the wonder of God's creation on a day out or a holiday. There might be special places for us, perhaps a historic church that has been soaked in prayer for centuries where we can hope to meet with Jesus. There will be times when we are with family and friends who are special to us, and when we celebrate special occasions that we will look to meet with Jesus as well. All of these places are better considered as our Jerusalems.

Personally, I prefer to meet with Jesus when I have planned the meeting and am appropriately prepared. Sunday morning suits me fine. I can put on my Sunday best, choose the place where we can meet within a particular time slot and prepare myself mentally and spiritually for the encounter. But that is not how Jesus works. He chooses the everyday life of Galilee. As for being dressed in his Sunday best, Peter was naked (John 21:7) when he met and recognised Jesus. At one level this reminds us of Adam and Eve, taken by surprise by God in the garden of Eden, but Peter's nakedness reminds us of his and our vulnerability. Peter does put some clothes on for the meeting, but we must expect Jesus to meet us aware of our vulnerability and of our weaknesses, rather than when we are fully prepared and in our Sunday best.

Jesus wants to meet the real 'me' and not the 'me' that I have carefully prepared, and pretended to be, in order to impress him. I might, or might not, be able to convince other people on a Sunday morning about who I am, but I am not able to convince Jesus. Jesus knows who I really am and the more open I

am with myself, about who I really am, the sooner we can move to the authentic conversation when he meets with me.

When I first started interviewing people for the Church Mission Society, 40 years ago, most of those I interviewed had come from church families. Increasingly, over the years, this changed and many came from non-church families. These were those who Jesus had met with during their times of vulnerability; people who had faced a time of crisis: mourning; serious illness; breakdown of marriage or other relationship issues; addiction; abuse; unemployment; rejection; other crises. It gave me an amazing insight into God's grace and gave me an awareness that I should expect to be able to meet with Jesus when I was vulnerable and exposed, rather than when I thought that I was strong and concentrating upon my strengths rather than my weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

So recognising Jesus in our Galilee means we need to be able to recognise him in our everyday lives and in our workplace. It is essential that we look to experience Jesus in the place that is 'here' for us. We need to experience Jesus in our home, in our day-to-day relationships, in the places where we carry out our day-to-day activities, in the church that we regularly attend and among the people that we regularly worship with. It is important that we can learn to meet with Jesus in the mundane of our daily lives as well as in the special times. We need to meet and recognise Jesus in our disappointments, unfulfilled aspirations and the messiness of human relationships. We need to be able to find him in the events that cause us to lie awake and in the ambiguities and compromises that life presents us with. The good news is that it is in our 'here', our Galilee, where Jesus promises to meet with us.

What experiences do you have of meeting Jesus in the everyday life of your Galilee, rather than in worship or specifically Christian activities?

2 Galilee of the Gentiles

The thought of meeting Jesus in Galilee embraces the idea that we might meet with Jesus as we meet with those of other faiths and worldviews. How do we view those of other faiths? The answer will be determined partly by our previous experience of meeting those of other faiths. I had two different Jewish friends at different times at school. One was probably more atheistic than anyone else at school, and I didn't find out much about other faiths from either of them. I probably lived much of my life in a Christian bubble at university, and cannot think of anyone from another faith that I knew during that time. From those experiences, or lack of experiences, other faiths were belief systems, but weren't about real people, so weren't something I needed to take seriously.

Living in inner-city Rochdale, I met and made friends with a lot of Muslims. As I got to know them, they became people, rather than being defined by their ethnic grouping and faith; as with all people, some were good and some were bad and many were somewhere in between. Many very faithfully lived out their religious practices and some didn't. Some of those who lived out their religious practices very clearly had a strong religious faith that motivated their values and attitudes to life, and others didn't. They were first and foremost people, and diverse, then they were Muslims.

My generation was brought up with a sense of religious superiority, which didn't take other faiths seriously, so there was a need to break down that attitude within me. Meeting with people who I respected and finding out about their worldview and its impact upon their life meant that I had to take their worldview and faith seriously. What can easily happen after that is a reaction to the earlier sense of superiority; we can move to a position of deciding that all faiths are the same. In retrospect I realised that this is just as insulting to other faiths as it is to Christianity.

Being involved, as a Christian, with inner-city issues in Rochdale, we found ourselves working alongside Muslims and also Marxists; we obviously had a shared agenda to some extent in tackling various social and community concerns. For a few months we hosted a three-way dialogue that allowed us to get a better understanding of our worldviews, and what motivated us to be involved in the issues that we were involved in together. Subsequently I have often had deep conversations with Muslims and, to a lesser extent, with those of some other world faiths.

When you begin such conversations, you often begin to see that you have a shared vocabulary. But as you get deeper into discussions, you realise that the same words can have very different understandings. Muslims will talk about The Prophet, but will also talk of prophets and some of the prophets are the same ones as Christians would call prophets, but the understanding of the lives of those same prophets might be very different. In Islam prophets don't suffer, as such suffering wouldn't be tolerated by the God who sent them. In Judaism and Christianity a prophet seems more likely to suffer than to not suffer. Stephen in his final speech before martyrdom asks his persecutors 'Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?' (Acts 7:52). This different way of understanding prophets leads me to a better understanding of the way that God suffers. It is this suffering, on behalf of God's creation, which reveals the sacrificial love, shown by Jesus, at the heart of Christianity.

When I lived in a Christian community house in Middlesbrough, we were asked by the local Community Relations Council if we could temporarily host the new Community Relations Officer, a Muslim, while he found a permanent home. We had our own Christian liturgy that we tried, although not very successfully, to use every evening. Sharing our house with a Muslim, who went up to his room regularly every evening to pray after we had eaten and washed up together, did wonders for our joint Christian prayer life! There wasn't any sense of there being a spiritual competition going on, but we were impressed by his self-discipline in prayer and realised that we should learn from that and get a bit more self-discipline into our prayer life, rather than so easily finding excuses to do something else. That regular prayer life should have been part of our Christian life, but we hadn't really recognised it as such before.

There is an interesting sub-plot to the story of the visit of the wise men to worship Jesus in Bethlehem. They start the story as stargazers, who believe that the future is foretold; it is already determined and can be read in the stars (Matthew 2:1-2). After meeting with the infant Jesus, they have a dream warning them not to return to Herod, but to return to their own country by another road (Matthew 2:12). At the beginning of the narrative, they believe that the future is foretold, at the end of the narrative, they realise that their own actions can and will determine the future. When Matthew says that they return to their home by another road, he isn't just speaking geographically; their worldview has changed from believing that the future is foretold to believing that they can impact upon the future. In our own age, when we discover that some people believe that the future is predetermined, we can gain a better understanding of the way in which God allows us to help shape the future through our own actions and being involved with God in his mission.

It is in discussing my own beliefs with the member of another faith that I can better see and recognise the Jesus who is not part of the other person's perspective or, sometimes, recognise the Jesus they have revealed to me who should have been in my own understanding, but who I had previously failed to see. While I feel that it would be nice to believe that all faiths lead equally to God, that would be to imply that the crucifixion was totally unnecessary; without crucifixion there would have been no resurrection. With all sensitivity and humility I can only declare that salvation for all, and the redemption of the whole creation, is only possible through Jesus' death and resurrection. I am aware that I haven't mentioned mission here; that will follow in the next chapter, but first we want to identify how we recognise Jesus ourselves within Galilee of the Gentiles.

Galilee of the Gentiles was also the hotbed of radical thinking and of revolutionary movements and rebel leaders. The religious authorities in Jerusalem were particularly wary of Jesus and his followers because they came from Galilee and that is where rebel movements often came from. As with discussions with those of other faiths, it is when we get into discussions with those of other worldviews that we might find that we can recognise Jesus in ways we hadn't noticed before. Throughout the centuries we have usually seen Christians at the forefront in challenging how society functions and in sharing love and resources with those who have been marginalised by society.

In Acts 2 and 4 we see radical sharing of possessions between the early Christians. The believers in the Diaspora collect money for famine relief, each according to their need, to be sent to Judea (Acts 11:27-30). From the first resurrection appearance and throughout Acts, we notice an increased understanding of the role of women in contrast to the prevailing cultural view, and in Acts and in Paul's epistles we see the barriers between Jewish and Gentile believers breaking down. The early, pre-Christendom Christians were pacifists. For centuries, the safety net to provide for the poorest in society was provided by the church, and churches offered sanctuary to those trying to escape legal injustices.

Most of the movements to provide education and healthcare and, more recently, other social provision have been started by Christians, usually taken on later by the state. It was Christians who challenged the evils of the slave trade. Although apartheid and racial injustices have often been built upon false biblical interpretations, Christians have been at the forefront of challenging and overcoming such views. Sadly, more recently, many would identify Christianity with preserving the status quo and with nationalist philosophies, but Jesus can still be recognised in movements which break down barriers and build up people to reach their full potential. There can be many challenges to us, but many opportunities to recognise Jesus in Galilee of the Gentiles.

What experiences do you have or meeting Jesus within an encounter with those of other faiths or other, non-Christian, worldviews?

3 Galilee and Jerusalem

The late Bishop John V. Taylor, a former bishop of Winchester, gave a talk in Winchester Cathedral in 1975 entitled 'Christ at both ends of the line'.¹ Using the image of Galilee as where we conduct work and earn our living, he described Jerusalem as 'the safe stronghold of faith, where age-long forms of worship are offered'. Speaking to a congregation, including many who commuted to London, he compared the distance between London and Winchester with the distance between Galilee and Jerusalem and spoke of the lack of connection that many of us make between our working life and our faith and worship.

He spoke of a Christian friend who taught Business Studies who had run an exercise with a group of top executives, where they had options to 'invest or sell or buy out'; asking one participant, 'As you made that decision, which was uppermost in your mind: increasing profits, improving the product or benefiting the people?' The man responded that 'he had never once asked himself that question'. The businessman later got in touch with man running the exercise, to say that he had been deeply involved with church for years and no one had ever asked him that question, so he concluded that he had been wasting his time going to church and had now stopped going!

Bishop Taylor's talk also mentioned that same Business Studies lecturer being invited, by a vicar of a commuter belt church in Surrey, to raise such questions about business methods and how faith impacted upon their decision-making. The discussion became very angry and disturbed and the initiative of the vicar in setting up such discussions in this way wasn't appreciated. I am aware that the article that I am quoting from was written 45 years ago, but I think that the questions that it raises on how we can make connections between our everyday life and our faith are still deeply relevant. More specifically, we need to consider how churches can enable open and honest discussions to take place. If we are only prepared to look for Jesus in the Jerusalem of our church involvement, we won't have a chance to recognise him in the Galilee of our workplace.

My first ever job was in chemical textile research. We discharged a huge amount of chemical solution into the local drainage system; one of my projects was to look at how we could separate this into water, to be reused, and a more concentrated chemical solution to be discharged into the drains. In the same week, I managed to prove that the plant we were trying to use wasn't up to the job and also that there was a fallacy in the original calculations, so that the more efficient our production system was, the less efficient our recycling attempts would be. My project was abandoned and we continued to throw away all of our chemical effluent. I decided I couldn't be effective as a concerned Christian in industry and decided to work with people instead, leading to a career in the charity section and then with Christian organisations.

In a church I belonged to for a few years in inner London there were people who had the freedom to choose the type of work they wanted to do, and those who, without the same educational advantages, had no options for choice. Among those who had choice, then nearly everyone was in the public or charity sector. People were social workers, probation officers, teachers, union representatives, health workers, charity or church workers, in public transport, local authority or civil servants. These people had found work that tied in with their Christian faith, but it wouldn't have been an easy church to feel at home within if you were working in the commercial or financial section when you moved into the area and joined.

At times I have revisited my decision to get out of industry; was it just taking the easier path? How do you resource yourself to be a committed Christian in industry, commerce or finance and be prepared to recognise and respond to the risen Jesus in the Galilee of your workplace? Christians do need to be working in these areas, to make difficult decisions and to weigh up the implications of their decisions on different people and groups and to be resourced by their churches as they make such decisions. Sometimes they will not make the best decision, and sometimes they will need to live with the

consequences of their decisions and also of their indecisions. The risen Jesus said he would meet his disciples in Galilee. We need to be prepared to meet with Jesus in the Galilee of our working life, but how can our churches help their congregations in this task of recognising Jesus and responding appropriately to him in the work place?

But if meeting Jesus in Galilee is about our meeting him in our place of work, it isn't just about the 'product' that we are involved in; it is also about how we conduct ourselves. Working for a Christian organisation can be wonderful at one level, but it, too, can have its challenges. I've never particularly felt tempted to swear at colleagues, but have had to resist the temptation to patronisingly place my hand on someone's shoulder and say that I will pray for them! It can be very confusing when at one level you gather to pray and worship together as equals before the Lord, then immediately return to a hierarchical management structure to make decisions. Christians are also notorious for trying to suppress conflict and be nice to each other and also spiritualise issues. It is amazing how much damage can be done by not facing up openly to issues. Fortunately I think that recently there has been more emphasis by Christians on learning to disagree well and acknowledging the creative tension there can be within difference.

I remember a big decision-making residential event that CMS held. Being CMS the event was embedded in prayer, but also enabled by consultants with modern decision-making software. Key statements, that each of us had made, needed to be fed into some software but, because we had been too wordy, the consultants needed an hour to precis what we had said into the space available in the software. Being CMS, this delay was obviously a time for additional organised prayer.

The software worked well; we were able to look at several groups of statements and individually prioritise them against each other; the end result of doing this was that definite conclusions emerged from the process. The trouble was that some people noticed that their statements had not been included in the choices; their contributions had been taken out of the process. So which paradigm were we working with? Was it entrusting the process to God through prayer, or to modern decision-making processes? Had the consultants just missed some of the contributions in their hurry to get the system up and running, or had God responded to our prayers for guidance by excluding or overruling certain contributions?

The above is just a snapshot of some issues and questions, some are not easy ones for individuals to answer, but through prayer, reading and encouraging churches to engage with the issues, we need to be finding ways to help us recognise and respond to the risen Jesus in the place which is Galilee for us.

What challenges have your work or other day-to-day activities presented to your faith?

Notes

1. This and 39 more of his talks and articles were published posthumously in *The Incarnate God*, the Mowbray Lent Book for 2004.

4 Church of the Beatitudes

What comes to our own minds when we think about Galilee? It is the place where Jesus had walked, preached and conducted miracles; Jesus had calmed the storm; he had also saved Peter when he tried to walk on the water and began sinking; and Jesus had enabled the disciples to make huge catches of fish. From my visits to Galilee, I find myself thinking about the sermon on the mount, and the Church of the Beatitudes. Galilee offers the opportunity for deep spiritual experiences. But with our deep spiritual experiences and experiences of church, we are not always on ground that is safe and secure; we can find ourselves faced with fallen-ness, ambiguity and compromise.

The Church of the Beatitudes is built on a slight mount, just above the Sea of Galilee, and is considered the likely site of the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5). It has an octagonal design, so that each side reflects one of the eight beatitudes; it is built in the neo-Byzantine style. It is a delightful peaceful setting, with gardens. The church was built between 1936 and 1938. Visiting there can be a very moving spiritual experience. That is, until you read the small print and realise that the building of the church was commissioned by the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. How do I hold together the beauty and peace of the location and the wonderful challenge of the beatitudes, with the evil of the man who commissioned the building of this church? Does it need a certain amount of ambiguity and compromise to do so?

This all came back to mind at a recent church group meeting. A scandal about a high-profile, international, Christian figure and writer had recently become public knowledge and, justifiably, there was disappointment and anger expressed within our group. It is not a question just for Christians and, with all that has come to light as a result of the recent #MeToo movement, there are huge questions about whether we can still appreciate the films directed by certain directors and the music and paintings by certain artists, or whether their actions should override any appreciation we once had for their work. There is the further question of, even if we can still appreciate their work, whether we should allow ourselves to do so or is doing so affirming not just their artistic work but also their behaviour. What goes on in the world in general doesn't necessarily impact upon my faith, but issues going on in the church and Christianity should do so.

This moral question reminded me of a similar conversation that I had experienced with a group that I had taken to Galilee the year after my first visit to the Church of the Beatitudes. We were about to sing a particular, popular, chorus of that time about togetherness. One young lady said that she couldn't sing that chorus anymore because the writer of the chorus had recently left his wife. I asked the question as to whether she could still use the psalms of David in her worship. David had gone further than just using his position of power to commit adultery with Bathsheba, he had gone on to arrange for her husband, Uriah the Hittite, to be killed in war so that he could make the adulterous relationship with Bathsheba permanent (2 Samuel 11). Do we have the same problem in affirming the work and contribution of someone who has been dead for a number of years, David or Mussolini for example, compared with someone who is still alive or only recently dead?

A few of us in our church group use Morning Prayer regularly; the Old Testament readings that week were from Genesis, particularly focusing on the dubious behaviour of Jacob in his relationship with his brother, father and father-in-law. We went on to note that in the Old Testament God often had a habit of using seriously fallen individuals for his purposes. These reflections, which stem from visiting the Church of the Beatitudes, remind me that whatever else Galilee might be, it can be a place of ambiguity, compromise and moral questioning. If we can expect Jesus to meet us in Galilee, then we can expect him to meet us in the place of difficult moral decisions; in the places where we need to engage with taking stands, of ambiguity and of compromise. In particular, Galilee reminds me of the ambiguity and compromise that we often come across within the church.

If we are going to be able to recognise Jesus in our own Galilee, then we will need to work out how we approach such situations. Eventually I felt that God showed me the way forward with this problem. I had found myself looking at the church and its fallen-ness, rather than looking at Jesus. Returning to the Church of the Beatitudes, I needed to stop looking at the small print about the building, which says who commissioned it to be built, but look instead at the big print within the octagonal walls showing what Jesus actually said there.

Matthew 5:3–12¹

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven – Being poor in spirit is about knowing my dependence upon God, acknowledging that it is not me who achieves anything on my own, but God who achieves through me. God only blesses my endeavours when I pray about them and seek his guidance.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted – Being able to mourn is not just about getting in touch with my own loss and pain, but being able to share in, understand and empathise with other people's loss and pain.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth – The third step in following Jesus is about my attitude; I need to be meek. In our postmodern world, Christianity is just one of many worldviews, and increasingly in a minority. Meekness means that through my lifestyle and actions I need to earn the right to be heard. Meekness is different from weakness and Jesus, as he journeys towards Jerusalem and the cross, provides a role model for us to act in humility and reflect his vulnerability.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled – Righteousness is about being in a right relationship with God. As Jesus and the Old Testament prophets remind us, righteousness includes being concerned about justice, peace and God's creation and being in right relationship with others. If I have really got in touch with people's pain and feelings, I realise that Jesus doesn't just want me to talk about issues and respond with the time and money I have left over; being in touch with pain and feelings should lead me to hunger and thirst for this righteousness.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy – The next step is, again, about my attitude; it can be grudging and judgemental. Jesus expects better of me. He reminds me of his grace, mercy and forgiveness and expects me to show grace, mercy and forgiveness to others.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God – Pureness of heart is the next step in the journey of following Jesus; it is about reflecting God's values and standing up for God's values. This can sound judgemental. But these steps are deliberately ordered to point the way. It is only when I have entered into the other person's pain and feelings and reminded myself of God's righteousness and mercy that I can, meekly, speak out about God's values.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God – Christians are often seen as being conflict avoiders, but we are called to be peacemakers; this involves embracing conflict and, as with the early church, affirming the creativity of difference. Those earlier steps of empathising with feelings combined with meekness, righteousness and mercy prepare us for this step towards a calling as peacemakers, a calling much needed in this day and age.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you – For Christians in many parts of the world, following these steps might lead to persecution. For us in the west, it is more likely to be a sense of

marginalisation, confusion and ridicule; so Jesus reminds us that for those who follow this path, 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

Yes. We will come across fallen-ness, ambiguity and compromise within our churches, but if we are able to look beyond these barriers, able to look at Jesus, we should be able to find that he is giving an example and teaching to bring to these situations.

Thinking of occasions when you have been aware of fallen-ness, ambiguity or compromise within Christian institutions; how have these impacted upon your Christian life?

Notes

1. For a fuller understanding of what follows, read Steven Croft, *Jesus' People: What the church should do next* (Church House Publishing, 2009).

5 Déjà vu

Reading about the seven disciples going fishing (John 21:1–8) made me wonder if any of them were actually any good at fishing. We first come across four of them (Luke 5:3–11), when they had experienced an equally unsuccessful night's fishing. As well as these two stories, we also know that Peter was instructed to catch just one fish (Matthew 17:24–27) and remove the coin in its mouth to pay the Temple Tax. If we just take the gospel narratives, the only times Peter seems to be able to catch any fish is when he closely follows Jesus' instructions. All four gospels have stories of Jesus calling the first disciples. In Matthew (4:18–22) and Mark (1:16–20) they are described as fishermen, but no mention is made of the unsuccessful night's fishing. In John, Jesus is picking up some of John the Baptist's disciples (John 1:35–40).

Although placed at completely different ends of the gospel accounts, there are certain similarities between the unsuccessful accounts of the night's fishing in Luke and John's stories to wonder if they are two versions of the same event; but there are also significant differences. In Luke 5 there are four (potential) disciples in two boats. In John's account there are seven disciples in one boat and they catch a large, but precise, number of fish. In both accounts, they almost lose the entire catch because there are so many fish.

Let us assume that they are separate events, but with enough similarities for Peter to gain a real sense of déjà vu. Following instructions, Peter and the other disciples have gone back to Galilee, where Jesus has said that he will meet the disciples (Matthew 28:7; Mark 16:7; Luke 24:6). Peter, never one to hang around, initiates the fishing expedition. Whether there is any significance in the fact that they are operating without Jesus' presence or not, we don't know but, as on the night before they were called by Jesus to be disciples, they catch nothing. In both stories they follow the advice of the unknown stranger on the shore and are successful in catching a lot of fish; so many that you might expect the net to break, but it doesn't. John points out to Peter that the unknown stranger is the Lord and Peter dresses himself before hurrying ahead into the water to meet with Jesus.

Much has been made of the exact number, 153 fish. Was 153 the number of different types of fish? Was 153 the number of different nations? Was the number 153 a way of proving that it was a huge catch? Was 153 the actual number of fish that they caught? We don't know.

What might be going through Peter's head as he recognises Jesus and experiences a sense of déjà vu, with his previous events described by Luke? There might be an understanding of how much he depends upon following Jesus' instructions to achieve anything; there will certainly be a reminder of how Jesus called him to follow him and to be a fisher of men. But there could also have been another sense of déjà vu at work here. Smell can act as an amazing trigger to our senses and to our memories. We are reminded (John 21:14) that this was the third time that the risen Jesus had revealed himself to the disciples. This comment carries its own significance because it was Peter, standing warming himself beside another charcoal fire, who had denied Jesus three times in the high priest's courtyard after Jesus' arrest (John 18:17–27).

These déjà vu experiences will remind Peter of the Jesus that he committed himself to follow and that he went on to deny; we will go on to explore the outworking of this in the next section and see that second time around the lakeside meeting between Peter and Jesus is a much deeper occasion that will have lifelong consequences. But do we rediscover memories of previously meeting Jesus within our own moments of déjà vu and, if so, what will be the discoveries and implications for us?

You may be able to recall your own déjà vu experiences, where a certain situation has made you recall Jesus at work in your life at a previous time. If so, are there things to be learnt from the memories? Peter would have been reminded of the affirmation of his calling to be a fisher of men, but also of how, despite

all of his bluster that he would never deny Jesus, he did go on to let Jesus down. You may want to bring to mind some of the ups and downs of your Christian journey and prayerfully invite Jesus to meet you within your re-examination of those events.

When I think about Peter's denial of Jesus, in the high priest's garden, I am aware that, unlike the other disciples, at least Peter was brave enough to follow Jesus that far. When I do this, I realise how easy it is for me to try to justify myself, to Jesus, about my own failings. Am I able to recall, before Jesus, the ways in which I have let Jesus down without trying to justify myself and my actions? If I do that, then I can begin to seek his forgiveness. If I am justifying myself instead, then I am not really seeking forgiveness and, subsequently, unable to be forgiven. Can I bring past events to Jesus, which I feel confused or ambiguous about, so that if I find myself in a similar situation in future I can feel more confident about the right way forward?

Try to recall your first meeting with Jesus, the first time that you recognised who he was and the implications that he had upon your life then. How do you view that encounter now? Are there questions that you can prayerfully ask him now or things that you want to offer to him now which relate to that experience?

Peter denied Jesus three times, in the high priest's garden. He went on to be commissioned three times by the lakeside. Before Peter meets with Cornelius's men (Acts 10:9-16), Peter has the threefold dream. Peter recognises the pattern and realises that a dream that raises the same question three times fits into how Jesus communicates with him. Are there any patterns that we can see within our meetings with Jesus? All of these exercises can help prepare us better to recognise, and respond to, the risen Jesus when he next tries to catch our attention.

What lessons are there from meeting Jesus in past situations which could help you recognise and respond to him in the future?

6 Forgiveness of sins

One of the central themes of Easter is Jesus dying on the cross to bring about the forgiveness of our sins. Not surprisingly, for Peter, the outworking of this is beside the Sea of Galilee – Galilee having been the place of his everyday work as a fisherman. The culmination of this is found in John 21:15–17, but the narrative really begins on Maundy Thursday with the Last Supper and the events that follow this. My reflections upon Peter and forgiveness also began one Maundy Thursday.

My main recreation, and opportunity for creative reflection, is cycling, and, in anticipation of some better weather and opportunities for cycling over the Easter weekend, I decided to clean my bike one Maundy Thursday afternoon. There were several hundred miles of winter muck, mud and grease on the bike when I started to clean it. When I finished cleaning it, the bike was spotless and gleaming, but I was filthy with the muck that had been on the bike. Fortunately, as with Jesus washing the disciples feet before the last supper (John 13:4–11), I had taken off my ‘outer robe’ and I had put my old work clothes on instead. We will be familiar with this reading and often with the enactment of the foot washing and the reminder that we are all called to sacrificial servanthood.

We might well be familiar with the resistance that most people have to being one of the ones whose feet are washed. The women will often choose to wear trousers over tights, to give a modest excuse to avoid taking part. If we know that we have been chosen as a ‘volunteer’, then the best option is to wash our feet carefully beforehand, spray them with an antiperspirant and put clean socks on. Hopefully the weather is warm enough to get away with sandals over the socks so there is no chance of further sweating and smelly feet. If we have had this experience, and any of these feelings, we will empathise with Peter’s reaction of not wanting Jesus to wash his feet for him.

To understand fully what is going on, it is worth exploring another bit of washing that goes on later that night; the bit of washing that has given us the term ‘to wash my hands’ of a responsibility. When Pilate washes his hands (Matthew 27:24) it is not to remove physical dirt, but to express that he is innocent of Jesus’ death. Pilate, and we must assume most within that society, saw a very clear link with physical washing and taking away guilt. When Peter makes the connection and accepts Jesus’ offer to wash his feet, he wants to opt for the full bath; well, at least his head and hands as well. Jesus reassures him of the symbolism of the act and that once you have been bathed by Jesus you do not need to wash again.

At the heart of the story of Jesus washing Peter’s feet and his, and our, reluctance to have our feet washed is the fact that, however much we may want to and try to, we cannot take away our own sin. Only Jesus can do that for us. Unfortunately, my bicycle cannot clean itself; it needs me take away its dirt and in doing so I get dirt upon myself. We need Jesus to take away our dirt, our sin, and, in the process of cleansing us, he takes on our sin. The Old Testament concept of the scapegoat is found in Leviticus 16:8–10, where atonement for the nation’s unintentional sins is achieved by heaping them upon a goat which is then released into the wilderness, to take that sin away.

The story of Jesus washing feet gives a graphical representation of Jesus taking away the dirt of others, by taking it upon himself, and prepares us for the events of Good Friday, where Jesus, bearing our sins, dies on the cross for our forgiveness. There are various ways in which we can understand the atonement; different understandings will resonate in different ways with different people and all contribute to the divine mystery of our understanding of the cross and resurrection.

The account of the foot washing gives us one theoretical interpretation of atonement, but the events beside the Sea of Galilee reveal the outworking of this in Peter’s life. Here, beside another charcoal fire, next to the Sea of Galilee, there is the threefold questioning of Peter as to whether he loves Jesus ‘more than these’ (John 21:15–17). Peter feels hurt, because Jesus repeats the question twice more. But the threefold questioning resonates with the threefold denial. The sin in question is clearly recognised by

Peter and, with the commissioning of Peter to feed Jesus' sheep, Peter is empowered in his role within the disciples. Our deep-down understanding of being forgiven by Jesus doesn't just lie within our words of confession and the promise of forgiveness, but is proven by being given new tasks to do by Jesus. The final word on the subject is Jesus' instruction to Peter 'follow me'.

Sin is about the breakdown of our relationship with God, with other people and with God's creation. It also includes the breakdown of the relationship we have with ourselves. We carry our guilt and are aware of our unworthiness. Because of this, we can cause all sorts of problems for ourselves and stop ourselves from functioning properly, and reaching our potential in God. We can easily find ourselves trying to earn our forgiveness and our salvation. If this is the case, then any commission that we think that we receive from Jesus can become confused and we are responding out of guilt, not out of love. If we are not assured that we have really been forgiven, then it is very difficult to clearly hear the words that Jesus said to Peter and to follow.

Returning to the foot washing, after Jesus has taken away the dirt on the disciples, he tells them to wash one another's feet. In seeing this just as an instruction to servanthood, we easily miss the deeper meaning. We are instructed by Jesus to be involved in taking away the sins of others. Jesus, who takes sin upon himself by cleansing us from our sin, instructs us to also be involved in taking away sin; this will sometimes involve us in getting mucky.

I remember visiting a Christian centre in Hong Kong, many years ago. It was an old Buddhist monastery, where the Buddhist community has converted en masse to Christianity decades beforehand. It had become a resource for research into other faiths and sects and work with other faiths. The baptismal font was in the shape of a lotus leaf, a symbol of purity in Buddhism. This imagery, and other Buddhist imagery, had been absorbed into the design of the centre and the centre felt it had been successful in sharing Christianity with Buddhists. The lady running the centre spoke openly of the criticism that they had received from some Christians over the years suggesting that in using Buddhist imagery they had compromised their Christian beliefs. She didn't criticise the critics in return, but acknowledged that in trying to follow Jesus within the complexities of the modern world they might have occasionally got it wrong but, if they had, she believed that Jesus would understand and forgive them.

If we follow Jesus, and try to wash away the sin of the world among some of the complexities of our world, then we might easily find that we are taking on some of the sin of the world. But if we are truly trying to follow him, then we will find that he continues to wash away our sin.

In what ways do you feel assured of God's forgiveness in your life? How has this freed you up to help bring God's forgiveness to others?

Part 4: Commissioned

1 Christendom and beyond¹

To understand the significance for us of Jesus commissioning his disciples, it is helpful to look at certain aspects of church history. The book of Acts, while leaving us uncertain as to what will happen to Paul, takes the early church from Jerusalem towards the ends of the world via Judea and Samaria. As far as the vast majority of the early Christians were concerned, the Roman Empire was their world; Rome, where Paul ended up, was for them the centre of their known world.

Despite Christians initially being among the poorest and most marginalised within the Roman Empire, and periodically facing severe persecution, by the beginning of the fourth century Christians formed 10% of the empire's population. This averaged a 40% growth each decade over a period of 250 years! The Christian population included respected citizens; Christian influence was increasing and paganism was waning. Constantine was sympathetic to Christianity and had a vision, before the Battle of Milvian Bridge (AD312), that he should fight under a Christian banner. He did so and won, making him sole emperor of the Western Roman Empire. The Edict of Milan, the following year, took away the risk of Christians being persecuted and gave them new rights. From 324 until his death in 337, Constantine was the emperor of the whole of the Roman Empire. He built Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, as the New Rome, in 330.

Constantine was deeply religious, and combined his original 'solar monotheism' (sun worship) with his rather poor grasp of Christianity and was baptised just before his death. Constantine was keen to get rid of paganism and Christianity was a vehicle to do this. Gradually Christianity became the imperial religion and, with persecution still a recent memory, Christians could only see this whole process as being part of God's will. Christians and the church received financial inducements and Christian leaders gained status. The initial makeup of the Christian community transcended socio-economic and gender barriers; Christians were good at caring for not only their poor, but also the pagan poor and there was, generally, a return to monotheism. Within 80 years of the Edict of Milan, Christianity had become the imperial religion and Christendom had been established.

An imperial religion demanded unity of belief. Constantine saw ecumenical councils, bringing together church leaders from different countries and traditions, as a way of achieving this. Instead they defined what could be believed in within the Roman Empire and created barriers of belief with Christians outside of the Roman Empire. Although humility and tolerance of other beliefs had been characteristics of the early church, gradually Christians gained a sense of arrogance; inducements, coercion and force were sometimes used to bring people to faith. Those who became Christians were rarely given an effective catechism and Christian teaching was about avoiding heresy, rather than about any sense of ethical transformation or spiritual growth. With church and state so closely tied together, heresy was the same as treason, and was punished accordingly.

St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) developed biblical interpretations which helpfully related biblical teaching to the realities of Christendom, but some of this took the church into, what I believe to be, unhelpful directions. Originally the church was viewed as being distinct from the world, but as the church took on more of the world's values, the church and the world became one. Although the parable of the wheat and weeds (Matthew 13:24–30, 37–43) was about the world, it was now seen to be about the church which would be divided into wheat and weeds at the end of the age. In the parable of the wedding banquet, the master tells his slave to 'compel people to come in' (Luke 14:23). For Augustine, compelling people to become Christians, by whatever means, was something that Jesus had made legitimate with this parable! The Old Testament was about the nation of Israel, the New Testament was about groups

of individuals. Often the Old Testament was seen as being more useful for forming rules and ethical standards within Christendom than the New Testament.

Discipleship became equated with loyal citizenship and maintaining social order became more important than achieving social justice. The Christian focus changed from the coming of God's kingdom to an emphasis upon individual salvation. Loving enemies, and the pacifism of the early Christians, were replaced by the concept of the Holy War and the cross became a symbol of power to be fought under, rather than a symbol of the self-giving love of Jesus. Within the nation state, everyone was considered to be a Christian, so there was no need to evangelise and mission was replaced by maintenance, except some specialist agencies might conduct mission activities. Overseas mission was about transplanting Christendom.

Through the ups and downs of the Roman Empire, and the whole development of nation states and European wars, Christendom became the glue which held society together. Within the English Reformation there was the break from Rome under Henry VIII, the move to an extreme Protestantism during the brief reign of Edward VI and the return to Rome under Mary Tudor before the establishment of Anglicanism under the longer, and more stable, reign of Elizabeth I. All needed to follow the religious choice of the monarch. Obedience and blindly following were what was required to be a Christian. Personal belief and faith might lead to you differing from the norm and might lead to heresy and martyrdom rather than to being considered as a Christian!

Although the Reformation tried to take the church back to its biblical roots, it still wanted to hold on to the church-state relationship that Christendom provided. Churches were reformed to change doctrinal beliefs and practices, but there was no attempt to evangelise Christendom or respond to the plight of the poor and marginalised. Before the Reformation, the monasteries had been at the forefront of providing medical, education and social care, but this suffered with the dissolution of the monasteries. By the eighteenth century England wasn't the only European country to be morally and spiritually corrupt. In response to huge social inequalities, some European countries experienced revolutions. England experienced an evangelical revival influenced by people like George Whitfield, Charles Wesley and, later, William Wilberforce, the Clapham Sect and Lord Shaftesbury. In the nineteenth century there was also an Anglo-Catholic renewal. Such renewals focused not only on spiritual renewal, but also addressed social evils within an increasingly urbanised society.

Christendom provided security and certainty, as long as you didn't ask questions. It brought whole nations in touch with Christianity and often provided education and medical care and a safety net of social care. However it blurred the lines between the church and the world and blunted the cutting edge of the Christian message, removing the evangelistic initiative and toning down the emphasis upon distinct Christian teaching.

During the last four centuries certain factors have gradually undermined Christendom:

1. There have been a large number of wars between Christian nations, usually with each nation having the belief that God was on their side in the war. Such wars have resulted in growing numbers of casualties with increasing numbers of civilians killed as well as military.
2. The Enlightenment and the beginning of the 'modern era' suggested that everything could be understood through science and philosophy and there was no need to look at the world through a religious prism. Reason was considered more important than revelation and the focus became far more upon this world than on the next with a belief that science and philosophy could solve all of the world's problems.
3. Scientific developments led to industrialisation, which led to urbanisation and the breakdown of traditional rural communities. The seasons of the church year had been affirmed by the natural rhythm of the seasons in agricultural communities; the population of the urban areas didn't make the same connections.

4. Postmodernism meant that there wasn't just the one interpretation of what was going on; we were opened up to different narratives. Teaching moved away from just being didactic, we were opened up to different text books, with different interpretations and, more recently, the internet means that you no longer need any text books but can just google a topic and believe whatever comes up towards the top of your search.
5. Pluralism has come about in various ways. Both the commercial benefits of globalism and the tragedy of refugees and asylum seekers mean that we encounter diversity of views and other faiths have become worldviews that we come across through the people that we meet, not just through hearsay, so need to take seriously.

The word secularism originally meant the divide between church and state, more recently it has been understood as representing an aggressively anti-Christian perspective. All of this comes at the end of an era where the church has forgotten the need, or strategies, for either evangelising or conducting serious instruction of what Christianity should mean to its followers.

Christendom was quite a long time in its making and, similarly, its demise is gradual. As we move from Christendom to what is referred to as post-Christendom, we are in what is usually known as late-Christendom. We need to hold together these three paradigms as we begin to think about the commission that Jesus gave to his followers.

The end of Christendom means the end of the privileged position that Christians have had and the affirmation that the state has given to the Christian worldview, but it is made more confusing because we don't always know whether we are in Christendom, late-Christendom or post-Christendom. We can watch a royal wedding on television, or attend a cathedral service or certain other big Christian activities and believe we are in Christendom. We can listen to those who have given up on Christianity, who know the Christian story and who have given up on church and we experience late-Christendom. We can meet with those who have no understanding of the Christian message and have never been in a church. They may be from another religious faith, with roots in another part of the world, but increasingly they can be indigenous British people. In these encounters we are engaging with post-Christendom.

What are the opportunities and challenges that Christendom still presents to your church? What are the opportunities and challenges that late/post Christendom presents to your church?

Notes

1. I have been very selective in pulling out some key facts to try to understand this topic. For a fuller understanding I recommend Stuart Murray, *Post Christendom* (Paternoster, 2004).

2 Who is being commissioned?1

In the final chapter of each of the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) we read the story of Jesus commissioning his remaining eleven followers to go and make disciples of all nations. We need to ask ourselves about the relevance of that commission to us today. Who is Jesus really commissioning? Is it just those eleven men, or is it certain individuals who feel that God has called them, or is it the whole church? Luke provides us with a fuller version of this commissioning (Acts 1:6–8). So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

Here they were instructed to wait until after the Holy Spirit came upon them. The events of Pentecost, described in Acts 2, brought about a great sharing of the gospel around Jerusalem. The martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7) led to the persecution of Christians with many moving out from Jerusalem (Acts 8) and Philip sharing his faith in Samaria and with the Ethiopian eunuch. We have mentioned Peter sharing his faith with the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10–11), but there was a lot of work for the Holy Spirit to do to convince those early Jewish believers that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Eventually it was taken into the wider world. It certainly sounds as if the first disciples did not think that the Great Commission was aimed at them!

It is interesting to note the attitude of the early Protestants towards the Great Commission. Johann Gerard, who died in 1637 stated that 'the command of Christ to preach the gospel to all the world ceased with the apostles; in their day the offer of salvation had been made to all the nations; there was no need for the offer to be made a second time to those who had already refused it'.

Robert Bellarmine, a noted Roman Catholic scholar, clearly saw that the lack of belief in mission of the Protestants proved that they were heretical. Writing in the late 17th century, about the 18 marks of the true church, he stated, 'Heretics are never said to have converted either pagans or Jews to the faith, but only to have perverted Christians. But in this one century the Catholics have converted many thousands of heathens in the new world. Every year a certain number of Jews are converted and baptised at Rome by Catholics who adhere in loyalty to the Bishop of Rome; and there are also some Turks who are converted by Catholics both at Rome and elsewhere. The Lutherans compare themselves to the apostles and the evangelists; yet though they have amongst them a very large number of Jews; and in Poland and Hungary have the Turks as their near neighbours, they have hardly converted so much as a handful.'

The early Protestants, like the early church at the time of the first disciples, had other issues to worry about. Until 1648 they were literally fighting for their lives, so they interpreted the Great Commission in a limited way. It was only when the western colonial expansion began in the 18th century that the Protestants rediscovered the Great Commission. Meanwhile, there had been Roman Catholic missionary work related to the Spanish and Portuguese colonial endeavours including South America, India and China. We know from the account in Acts that the commission would not come into effect until the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' words, in Acts 1:8, are a promise rather than a command, a promise which would be fulfilled with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Acts account tells how one further matter still needed to be sorted out after the Great Commission and before Pentecost. A twelfth apostle would be appointed to replace Judas. The fact that Matthias was chosen, in verse 26, rather than Joseph called Barsabbas, seems immaterial. Neither of them is ever mentioned again in the Bible. What was important was that the apostles were twelve again; within Hebrew tradition this is the number of completeness. There were twelve tribes of Israel and Jesus deliberately chose twelve disciples to show that he represented the fulfilment of Israel.

The completion of Christ's mission is symbolised by the New Creation and the advent of the New Jerusalem, complete with twelve gates, twelve walls and twelve angels (Revelation 21:12-14). The fact that the Spirit did not come until the disciples were twelve again indicated that it was the whole body of Christ, the church, that was being commissioned and not just a group of individuals. The commission given, by Jesus, to those eleven disciples was really given to the whole church; to all of us. But what do we mean by the church? I believe that there are two dangers that we can fall into in trying to answer this question. Some will want to speak of the elect and define the church as being those who are saved; others, in reaction to sense of exclusion that this answer produces, will want to avoid the terms like elect, or chosen people, and feel more comfortable with the blurring of the boundaries, such as happened during Christendom. My starting point is that God loves his whole creation; he loves all people and desires to save all people. So how can terms like elect and chosen people fit into this vision?

In answering this question, we need to have an understanding of what the term 'elect' really means, and not fall into the trap that Israel so often fell into in the Old Testament. When we elect people within a democracy, either politically or within organisations, then what we are really doing is choosing people for responsibility; for specific tasks, not for privilege or status. Sadly, those we elect sometimes feel, and act, as if they have been chosen for privilege, rather than for responsibility! This is the trap that Israel often fell into. Israel assumed that being God's chosen people meant that God had chosen them so that they could be protected and treated with preference.

In his mission to try to save everybody, God chooses certain people for specific tasks. Those that he chooses become his church; they are set aside, to be separate from the world in order to bring God's redeeming love to the world in order that all can be saved. People are not chosen because they are better, cleverer or wealthier than other people and they certainly aren't chosen to be treated better than other people or especially protected. As mentioned earlier, many who God chose in the Old Testament weren't particularly nice, but he chose them to do particular things for him. God's creation is diverse, people are diverse and the people that God chooses now will be diverse and many will be different from us; it is not up to us to decide that we can only work with those who are similar to us. God commissions those that he has chosen to be his church.

How can we affirm that we are chosen for responsibility, rather than privilege both within, and outside of, our churches?

Notes

1. Much of this section was originally included in Stuart Buchanan, *On Call* (BRF, 2001), pp. 111-12.

3 A Trinitarian Great Commission¹

The early Protestant church ignored the Great Commission until the late eighteenth century; this coincided with the beginning of the great colonial expansion. Just as the early church sent people to share the gospel with the Jews scattered through the Roman Empire, so did the churches of the western colonial powers send clergy to minister to their own people in the colonies. Just as the Holy Spirit used the early Christians to reach the Gentiles, so the same Spirit used these clergy to reach not just the European people, but also the indigenous people in the colonies. By the end of the eighteenth century God's initiative had become a human initiative. For better, or for worse, the Great Commission was linked with the colonial expansion.

This colonial expansion was a time when Britain had decided, 'All authority on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make subjects of all nations; immersing them in the ways of the British, and teach them to observe all the British laws. And know that the Empire will be with you always: yes, to the end of time.'²

The British administrator, overseas, was told: 'You will receive power from the British navy, army and economy, and then you will be witnesses to what Britain stands for throughout Africa and Asia, and indeed to the ends of the earth.'³

In Matthew's account of the Great Commission, those commissioned are sent out with 'all authority in heaven and earth' – the authority of the Father. In Acts it is with 'the power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you' – the power of the Holy Spirit. The missionary endeavour of the colonial era had this same sense of authority and power. But how much did those on the receiving end of the colonial missionary enterprise feel that that the authority and power were of God the Father and the Holy Spirit rather than of the colonial rule?

As the Great Commission has become so caught up with the secular authority and power of colonialism, and neo-colonialism, it has become very easy to reject the Great Commission as being no longer relevant or appropriate and for it to be viewed as a remnant of a past colonial era which we need to repent of. I have often heard the term 'spiritual imperialism' used with regard to the idea of Christians going to the nations; to those of other faiths or world views. This attitude doesn't just apply to going to the nations; it is also experienced when we consider sharing our beliefs with those who are not Christian within our own country and locality.

While this is a criticism that should be taken seriously, I feel that the answer lies in looking again at our Bibles. Is there no version of the Great Commission to be found in John's gospel? There is: '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. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"' (John 20:20–23). This understanding of Jesus' commissioning his disciples has been largely ignored. Perhaps the reason it was ignored is because it didn't fit so well with the emphasis upon authority and power that undergirded colonial expansion.

The disciples are sent out as the Father has sent Jesus. But how did the Father send Jesus? Jesus showing the disciples his hands and side – the marks of the nails in his hands and the wound of the sword in his side – summed up his sending. The Son was sent by way of incarnation to crucifixion. He was sent the way of the cross, the way of total vulnerability. Jesus sends his disciples, his church, and us, as part of that church, in the same way.

In Matthew they are sent out with authority – the authority of the Father.

In Acts they are sent out with power – the power of the Holy Spirit.

In John they are sent out with vulnerability – the vulnerability of the Son.

We need to hold these three aspects of the Great Commission together in the same balance as they have within the Trinity. The church is commissioned to go out with the authority of the Father, the power of the Holy Spirit and the vulnerability of the Son. If we emphasise one or two of these elements at the expense of the others, we can easily distort the good news that we have to share, and we are not being true to our understanding of a Trinitarian God.

If we emphasise power and authority at the expense of vulnerability, we can, as has already been shown, get confused with the power and authority of our nation, wealth, education or background. If we emphasise the vulnerability and forget about the authority and power, we can easily end up with a crisis of confidence in the whole concept of mission, which seems prevalent in our own era. We can get so caught up in the vulnerability and the authority that we can experience a crisis of confidence in God's ability, because we forget that God does give us the very real power of the Holy Spirit. We can easily over emphasise the power of the Holy Spirit, but forget that God wants it used for his mission, and not just to show off that power for its own sake.

We need to be able to hold together these three aspects of how Jesus commissions his church. To determine the right balance among the three elements might depend upon our particular circumstances but also be shaped by what has gone before. Has there previously been too much emphasis upon power and authority, without any vulnerability? This, certainly, seems to be the model developed during Christendom. Has the emphasis been too much upon vulnerability at the expense of authority and power? This, certainly, has often been the reaction to the lack of humility and vulnerability that existed during Christendom. Prayerfully we can try to discern the Holy Spirit's leading in a particular situation. If in doubt, my advice is to initially opt towards vulnerability; it allows the Spirit to take the initiative and show his power, and the Father's authority, through our vulnerability.

This rediscovery of the vulnerability of Jesus within Christian mission is encapsulated with the concept of incarnational mission. Often the mission model was one where Christians went to do good things within another area, before returning home to their own area afterwards. Incarnational mission means living within the area where you are involved in mission; it means sharing in the issues faced by those who live in that area. Sharing in the reality and fears as well as the hopes and aspirations and joys and celebrations of that community; working closely with those people, Christians and non-Christians alike, in sharing the love of God within that area.

The 1910 Edinburgh Mission Conference was an ecumenical mission conference that looked at mission to different people groups and different parts of the world that was attended by Christians from Europe and North America. The centenary of that conference was marked by the 2010 Edinburgh Mission Conference; this welcomed Christians from all around the world. I believe that it was at this 2010 Conference that the term 'mission *with*' began to be used instead of the traditional understanding of 'mission *to*', which had been the dynamic of the 1910 Conference. 'Many feel more comfortable speaking of mission *with* others, rather than mission *to* others. Mission *to* implies a hierarchy within the relationship and that it is the other person who should change, not us. Being involved in God's mission *with* others, acknowledges that God can change both parties through the experience.'⁴

One of my own learning points from being involved with incarnational mission in inner-city areas was that although it was important to be involved in mission *with* others there can be a danger that the word 'mission' becomes a catchall for everything and the idea of Christian mission becomes watered down. It is essential we hold on to the distinctiveness of the Christian emphasis of mission and, of course, explaining that distinctiveness becomes an opportunity for sensitively witnessing to our own Christian

hope and motivation. It also means taking on board the worldview that motivates the actions of others and how that might challenge and broaden our own faith. The story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10–11), previously mentioned in part 2, is an example of how Peter has his Christian worldview broadened through the engagement in mission.

Think of aspects of mission that you and/or your church have been involved in. How do you see the balance between the authority of the Father, the power of the Holy Spirit and the vulnerability of the Son within these aspects of mission?

Notes

1. Much of this section was originally included in Stuart Buchanan, *On Call* (BRF, 2001), pp. 113–15.
2. Paraphrasing Matthew 28:18–20.
3. Paraphrasing Acts 1:8.
4. Stuart Buchanan, *Cross Cultural Christian* (St John's Nottingham, 2010), p. 205.

4 Forgiving and retaining sins

As well as saying that ‘as the Father has sent me, so I send you’, John describes Jesus as telling his disciples, ‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’ (John 20:23). I need to be honest and admit that I feel uncomfortable with the responsibility that this verse implies that I should be taking on. I also often feel uncomfortable with Christians, who seem to have no problem with this task. My problem is not so much with the forgiving, but with the retaining of sins.

A difficult text can be ignored, but should be looked at more deeply; identifying what my problem is and what the text is really saying might resolve the dilemma. I think that it is significant that Jesus spoke about forgiving and retaining sins immediately after saying ‘as the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ The Father sent the Son by the way of incarnation and vulnerability. There are three other factors about Jesus being sent by the Father that relate to sin. The Father sent the Son to die for our sins, be falsely condemned for sins that he did not commit and to forgive our sins.

Modernity meant that the church felt that it had the only valid worldview; it had all of the answers and could speak out strongly about what sin was and condemn sin and sinners. Many would feel that the church got rather too good at doing this and that some parts of the church continue this practice zealously. Post-modernity has made us more aware of other worldviews and that we, in our own time and place, might not have all of the answers. Christians are also more aware of the church’s hypocrisy or, as Jesus described it in Matthew 7:1–5, ignoring the log in our own eye and highlighting the speck in someone else’s eye. Many Christians have become increasingly embarrassed by being identified with a church that focuses so much on sin and is judgemental. Condemning and retaining sin is something that the church used to do but much of the church has abandoned. We easily give the impression that the church isn’t over-bothered about sin anymore and doesn’t take sin too seriously.

A very understandable change of perspective; the only trouble is that Jesus took sin very seriously. In fact, he took sin so seriously that he was prepared to die for sin: die for my sin; die for your sin; die for the sins of the world. Jesus came to redeem the world as part of God’s initiative to transform his creation so that it would become as he intended it to be. Jesus couldn’t achieve this by just ignoring what was wrong. Yes, Jesus will freely offer God’s forgiveness of sin, but first of all he needs to identify, name and confront sin. Through his sacrificial life and death he will overcome and defeat sin, but he can’t do this by ignoring sin. If we don’t name and identify what sin is in our own day and age and culture, then we are unable to try to address the causes and consequences of sin. After identifying sin, we can then begin to work with God in trying to address the tasks of restoring God’s fallen creation. This is why Jesus feels that it is so important to take sin seriously that he is prepared to die for our sins.

But before we rush to identify, name and confront sin, we need to consider the second way in which the Father sends the Son. He is sent to be falsely condemned for sins that he did not commit; it is primarily the religious authorities that condemn him. Jesus was acting out God’s will and purposes but the powers that be, particularly the religious authorities, were falsely accusing him of sinful behaviour. While I might feel that this gives the perfect excuse for avoiding passing any sort of judgement, I am not convinced that Jesus would agree with me. I need to try to look at things as Jesus would; with the ‘mind of Christ’.

Jesus was speaking into a worldview where sin was defined by an Old Testament perspective. There was the law, and the Pharisees had come up with lots of additional rules that helped create new sins; they created an impossible to keep set of laws, but seemed to totally miss the big picture of what God really expected and wanted from everyone. Throughout much of Israel’s history, God had sent prophets. There were two recurring themes uttered by these prophets. These were God’s demand for justice and righteousness, which included just and fair treatment of the poor and marginalised; there was also condemnation of idolatry. Of course, we no longer worship idols – or so we think. We can take away the

fancy names of the gods the idols represented and we can take away the shapes, forms and materials of these idols, but the underlying values that those idols represented were power, greed and fertility or lust. I think that these idols are often still worshipped instead of the God revealed in the life of Jesus.

I assume that when the church bought into the whole Christendom package, supported by the power and wealth of the state, then certain aspects of power and greed became part of the deal and ceased to be considered idols in quite the same way. At some point, sexual sins became the most easily identifiable type of sin; unless, of course, you had the power and wealth to hide such sins! This was probably also true in Jesus' time, as the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2–11) suggests. Given that it takes two people to commit adultery, why wasn't there also a man taken in adultery? The answer surely lies in the way that society and the religious authorities often view different people's sins; some people are considered sinful and others not.

I find it helpful to consider the story of the woman taken in adultery as three distinct stories; one told explicitly, and in detail, and two that we need to interpret by thinking about what isn't said and why it isn't said. The woman in the story is confronted by Jesus, is not condemned by Jesus but told to go away and 'from now on do not sin again'; she is forgiven by Jesus. Using the gaps, we can create the story of 'the man not taken in adultery'. Here, the man who committed adultery never faces up to his sin, is not confronted by Jesus, is not told that he isn't condemned by Jesus and never gets the instruction not to sin again. But it is only when we allow Jesus to confront us about our sin that we can repent, that is turn our lives around, and be forgiven and are free to move on as someone who is forgiven, told not to sin again and be able to follow Jesus. In this untold story, we are reminded why it is so important that sin is named and confronted; repentance and forgiveness can only occur when sin is identified and addressed; otherwise, by default, sins are retained.

The third story is the story of 'the religious authorities which are complicit in ignoring certain sin'. Obviously 'the system' had decided who should be identified as potential sinners and whose sin should be ignored. This isn't about forgiving or retaining sin, this is about one rule for women and one for men; one rule for the rich and one for the poor; one rule for this ethnic group or class and a different rule for another ethnic group or class. It is also, as suggested above, about ceasing to define the lack of justice and righteousness as sins, ignoring the idolatry of power and greed which just leaves the sexual sins of others as the predominant sin to focus upon.

It often seems as if we define sin as the things that other people do, which we disagree with. The message that Jesus gives us is that we are all sinners but through Jesus, if we admit our sins we can be forgiven and, with the power of the Holy Spirit, attempt to sin no more. It is from this starting point of humility, aware that we are forgiven sinners, that we should be working with other Christians in trying to work out what Jesus really meant by sin, and how we can help people find forgiveness and new life rather than condemnation.

A dilemma is that sin can be identified differently in different cultures and in different ages. As suggested, it can be easy to equate sin with another three-letter word beginning with the letter 's'. But sin is what enters the world in the story of the fall in Genesis 1–11. This is the narrative that describes the breakdown of the relationships between God and people, people and other people or between groups and nations; the relationship we have with ourselves; the relationship between people and creation. With this understanding we can see sin as anything that is helping to exploit or breakdown any of these relationships and stand in the way of how God wanted his creation to function. Jesus is condemned by the religious authorities for healing on the sabbath (Mark 3:1–6). On another occasion he says that he 'came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10). We are unlikely to find that acts that are life-giving, expressing unselfish love or enrich life are sinful.

Personally, with the Old Testament prophets, I feel that if acts are denying others of justice and righteousness and are exploiting people, we should be naming them as sinful. If acts are helping

breakdown our relationships with God, other people, groups or nations or with God's creation, they are likely to be sinful. I believe that we are all made in the image of God and that acts that demean people's humanity, our own or other people's humanity, or cause us to be ill at ease with ourselves, they are likely to be sinful. Again, not everyone will agree in defining what acts are sinful, but I find that this gives a helpful starting point in the debate. It is a debate which needs to be entered into with humility and awareness that we could have got it wrong; awareness of the need to be prayerfully re-assessing scripture and testing our conclusions with the wider body of Christ.

I don't have all of the answers, but I would be very worried if I felt that I did have all of the answers. Despite this, I realise the responsibilities that Christians like me do have in trying to provide a Christian perspective; otherwise sin might become defined solely by Christians who do feel that they have all of the answers. And that really would worry me.

How can you resource yourself for your own role within the tasks of forgiving and retaining sins?

5 Commissioned to where?

Clearly 'Jerusalem', 'Judea and Samaria' and 'the ends of the earth' are three distinct geographical areas. What is not so obvious is that they represent three distinct mission paradigms. Each would present its own challenges and would require different practitioners and different strategies. Despite Jesus' commission, there didn't initially appear to be a human strategy involved; the strategist was the Holy Spirit and the disciples struggled to realise that God's mission would take them outside of Jerusalem. There was a delay between being commissioned, prior to the ascension, and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but the feast of Pentecost gave the ideal timing for the beginning of the Jerusalem phase of beginning to fulfil the commission.

Those who gathered in Jerusalem that feast of Pentecost would have been devout Jews; not only from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, but also many making a pilgrimage to the festival from the Jewish Diaspora. They were people who were familiar with the Jewish scriptures and with the longed for Messianic hope. We do not know exactly what rumours were circulating about Jesus' resurrection but, as the disciples manifested the Spirit, Peter stood up and connected the pouring out of the Spirit with prophecies of the prophet Joel and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2). Peter, a devout Jew, is speaking to other devout Jews who believe the same scriptures and hold the same aspirations and who are able to make the connection between what they are experiencing in front of them, their knowledge of the scriptures, rumours of recent events and their religious aspirations. It is not surprising that 'day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 3:47). Stephen's speech, before he was martyred, again related Jesus' life, death and resurrection within the narrative of Jewish history and Messianic hope.

The mission paradigm of *Jerusalem*¹ is mission to people who are similar to you and have the potential to make the same connections between events and scriptures as you are making yourself. Although the Jerusalem mission continued, the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution and the scattering of Christians into Judea and Samaria marked the beginning of mission to Judea and Samaria. There is no human mission strategy involved here; the Holy Spirit remains the strategist. The people of Judea were still Jews, but more on the margins and it is likely that their beliefs and practices would have been diluted compared with those who lived in Jerusalem.

Those living in *Samaria* held some common beliefs with Judaism, but had also been subject to very different influences as well and generally there was antagonism between Jews and Samaritans. The mission to Samaria focused a lot on challenging evil forces and magic. We read that it looked as if Simon the magician had come to faith (Acts 8:18–24), but then we realise that there was a whole new depth of understanding, and further repentance, that would be needed before that would occur. Mission in Judea and Samaria is to people who have some similarities of understanding and of religious vocabulary to the disciples, but also many differences. Superficially, it can look as if it will be easy, but can then get complicated when the differences are discovered. It is far harder work than mission in Jerusalem.

To lead mission to *the ends of the earth*, the Holy Spirit chooses one who initially seems the most unlikely candidate; we first come across Paul when, known as Saul, he is persecuting Christians and present at Stephen's death (Acts 8:1). The dramatic nature of his conversion probably helped prepare him, as did his detailed knowledge of Judaism and of Greek philosophy and also his legal mind and Roman citizenship. A big difference between mission to the ends of the earth, compared with Samaria, is that those you encounter are less likely to have preconceptions about the Christian narrative and beliefs. The story of Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) gives some indications of a possible strategy.

Paul was motivated by his distress at the prevailing idolatry. The Athenians just enjoyed a good philosophical argument (v. 21) with anyone, but Paul was sincere in his motivation (v. 16). Through discussion, he was invited to address a meeting (v. 19). He started by praising how religious the

Athenians were (v. 22), rather than trying to condemn or belittle them and their beliefs. He found a starting point by identifying who their unknown god really was (v. 23) and goes on to back this up by quoting from their philosophers, rather than his own scriptures. Paul's starting point lay within the Athenians' religious practices and texts. Mission to the ends of the earth is to people who are very different to us and, obviously, Paul had done a lot of research and preparation before his encounter and, we go on to read that some scoffed, but some became believers (v. 32–34); progress was slow, compared with mission in Jerusalem.

With these three mission paradigms we should notice parallels with terms used in part 1, chapter 1 (The empty tomb), where we mentioned the church, the de-church and the un-church and part 4, chapter 1 (Christendom and beyond), where we mentioned Christendom, late-Christendom and post-Christendom.

Mission to Jerusalem is mission to people who are like us, have similar cultural understandings and values and the same understanding of the same texts as us. Every generation needs to be re-evangelised to be convicted of what their faith means to them within their own age and culture. This is mission to the church and to Christendom.

Mission to Judea and Samaria is mission to people who share much of our culture and values but do not share our faith. Usually they will be familiar with some of the Christian story, but perhaps have a very different interpretation of what it means compared to us, and hold on to a sense of folk religion; perhaps they have experience of church, but have rejected it. They may have found church boring, hypocritical or irrelevant; they may have been damaged by experiences of church or Christians, or they may have just drifted away and not followed up. These might be people who will attend church at Christmas, Mothering Sunday or other big events, or seek baptism or other rites of passage within church, but not normally attend. This is mission to the de-church and to late-Christendom.

Mission to the ends of the earth is mission to people who are different to us. They may be ethnically different to us, they may belong to a different world faith – but they don't need to be; increasingly they are indigenous British people. They don't have any real understanding or experience of Christianity or of church and won't have had meaningful discussions with practicing Christians. This is mission to the unchurch and to post-Christendom.

As mentioned, for the disciples Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth were three distinct geographical areas. An added complexity for us is that we may encounter these three overlapping mission paradigms, which require different mission strategies, within one geographical location. As we, and our churches, engage in mission, we need to prayerfully consider which mission paradigm we should be operating within and the best way in which to live out Christ's mission within that particular context.

Think of some different mission opportunities that you or your church are/could be involved in that fit into the three mission paradigms: Jerusalem (Christendom – the church); Judea and Samaria (late Christendom – de-church); ends of the earth (post Christendom – unchurch).
What are the different mission strategies that are applicable within these different mission paradigms?

Notes

1. The description of these three mission paradigms are taken from *Sharpening our focus on Evangelism and Church Growth: A preamble to the agenda for the February 2011 Anglican Communion Evangelism and Church Growth Initiative (ECGI) Core Group meeting presented by Bishop Patrick Yu on 15 February 2011 in Kuala Lumpur*. Bishop Patrick was then Bishop of York-Scarborough in Toronto Diocese, Canada and Chair of the Evangelism and Church Growth Initiative Core Group.

6 Commissioned to what?

Jesus commissions us, his church, and he commissions us with the authority of the Father, the power of the Holy Spirit and the vulnerability of the Son. He commissions us to our modern-day Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth, but what does he commission us to do? The different gospel writers all contribute their part to the bigger picture. We are commissioned to: make disciples, baptising and teaching them (Matthew 28:19–20); proclaim good news to the whole creation (Mark 16:15); proclaim the forgiveness of sins, in his name and be witnesses (Luke 24:47–48); be Jesus' witnesses (Acts 1:8); be sent as the Father sent Jesus and forgive sins (John 20:21–22).

Forgiving sins is a recurring theme, which we have explored earlier in this part and in the previous one; Matthew contributes the threefold task of making disciples, baptising and teaching, but the emphasis of Luke, in both his gospel and in Acts, is witnessing to Jesus. John says this in a different way, as we are to be sent as God sent Jesus. Before exploring this further, it is helpful to comment on the extra dimension that Mark adds; the good news is to be proclaimed to the whole of creation.

The Bible begins with the narrative of God creating his whole creation; the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). The Bible ends with the New Creation; a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1). The context of the full biblical story is the whole of creation, and so Mark is reminding us that the context for Jesus, and what he sends his church to do, is the whole of creation. Genesis starts with the creation narrative; the final stage of this process, before God rests, is the creation of people, made in God's image, to be stewards of his creation. The Genesis narrative goes on to explain that humankind is disobedient and rebels against God. We describe these passages as 'the fall' and talk of sin coming into the world, but as we read this story (Genesis 3) we see that not only does this lead to a breakdown in the relationship between God and humanity, but other relationships breakdown as well.

As soon as Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they feel shame and guilt and try to hide from God; neither is comfortable with self any longer; they experience dis-ease (Genesis 3:8–10). Next, we get the blame game, and they fall out with each other (Genesis 3:11–13). As a consequence, creation becomes fallen (Genesis 3:17–19) and will no longer cooperate fully with humanity. Within these first three chapters of Genesis the narrator is introducing us to God creating the heavens and the earth and concluding that it was, indeed, good; but then, through humankind's disobedience, sin enters the world and we see the breakdown of the relationship between God and people; individual people's relationship with themselves; the relationship between people, and hence between factions, communities, people groups and nations; the relationship between people and creation.

The good news for the whole creation will be nothing less than the restoration of these four relationships. As one of the broken relationships is that between different groups, it is not surprising to find that different parts of the church can sometimes focus upon their own interpretation of mission while denying the validity of other group's interpretation. Some will only want to bring people back to God, but not worry about how people treat each other. Others might want to share God's love with each other, but not question why injustices in society are accepted and never challenged. There might be an emphasis upon caring for creation at the same time as completely ignoring the role in bringing people back into full relationship with God. Anglicans have found it helpful to hold together the restoration of these broken relationships, with the more specific tasks spelled out by Matthew, within the Five Marks of Mission, which states:

The mission of the church is the mission of Christ:

2. To proclaim the good news of the kingdom;
3. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers;

4. To respond to human need by loving service;
5. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation;
6. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.¹

The Five Marks of Mission helpfully affirm that all of these expressions of mission are part of the totality of God's mission. Not everybody will be called to each of these aspects of mission, but it is important to recognise them all as valid parts of God's mission and to recognise that those involved in different aspects of mission are co-workers in the tasks of mission.

Statements like the Five Marks of Mission can be very useful tools. Some have found it helpful to reduce each Mark of Mission to a single word: tell; teach; tend; transform; treasure. Although easier to remember, there is always the danger that the words become a checklist so that we try to fit what we are already doing into these Five Marks. God's mission has these different dimensions, but we shouldn't lose sight of the bigger picture; God's mission is nothing less than the restoration of these different broken relationships to help transform the whole of creation back to how God intended it to be.

Luke, in both his gospel and in Acts, has Jesus send the disciples to be his witnesses and John has Jesus saying that as the Father sent me, so I send you (John 20:21). More than the individual parts of the story, we are sent to witness to Jesus in the way that Jesus, himself, was sent. This begs the question, often repeated within the gospels and which Jesus spells out specifically in Matthew 16:13–20, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' Matthew, writing primarily for a Jewish readership, starts to answer this question at the beginning of his gospel, tracing Jesus' ancestry from Abraham through to Joseph; Jesus is the new Abraham. Luke, writing primarily for a Gentile readership, starts with Joseph and traces Jesus' ancestors back to Adam, son of God (Luke 3:23–38); Jesus is the new Adam.

John begins his gospel with 'in the beginning was the Word'. Making some parallels with the character Wisdom, in Proverbs 8:22–31, Jesus being no less than a co-creator, with God the Father, of all things (John 1:1–5). Paul, among many other explanations, describes Jesus as the first fruit of the new creation (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). The new creation described in the last two chapters of Revelation, is something we will return to in the next chapter; the book of Revelation will also describe Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega (Revelation 22:13); the beginning and the end.

The Bible is God's salvation history. The New Testament writers show Jesus as: creation's co-creator; the conclusion of history; the redeemer of history; the purpose of history. This is the Jesus who commissions us to witness to him. The book of Revelation brings God's salvation story to its conclusion with heaven coming down to earth. Jesus taught his disciples to pray with the words of the Lord's Prayer where we pray, 'Thy Kingdom come on earth as in heaven.' Jesus is the king sent by the Father to inaugurate the rule of the kingdom on earth. Jesus begins the process of conquering and redeeming a fallen earthly realm, but he conquers and redeems through the power of sacrificial love. Through his ministry we see people being forgiven and their relationship with God being restored. We see evil overcome, conquered and cast out; we see people being healed, restored, transformed, returned to wholeness, reconciled with each other and comfortable with themselves again.

We become Jesus' witnesses by accepting him and worshipping him as our king and being citizens of his kingdom, here on earth, by following his example of lovingly living out the kingdom, the kingdom that conquers through self-giving love. We are commissioned by Jesus to work with God in the tasks of healing the broken relationships and helping in the tasks of redeeming and renewing God's creation through loving action and transforming societies and the world's values; to challenging unjust and dehumanising structures; acting out God's healing and forgiveness to help usher in God's kingdom here on earth. Although our own calling will be to specific tasks, within specific places, it is important that we don't lose sight of how such roles fit into the bigger picture of God redeeming His whole creation. There are many different tasks of mission but, at one level, they are all included within that first, overarching,

Mark of Mission mentioned above, of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. That must be our objective in every aspect of mission that we are involved in.

What mission tasks are you, or your church, involved in? Are there aspects of mission, suggested by the analysis in this section, which you or your church could explore for future involvement?

Notes

1. The Five Marks of Mission were agreed by the Anglican Consultative Council, the three-yearly meeting of representatives from the whole of the Anglican Communion. The first four marks were agreed in 1984 and the fifth added in 1990. In 2012 the fourth mark was modified to include peace and reconciliation.

Part 5: Lost and found

1 The body in question

Underlying all of the post-resurrection appearances there is an unasked question which I have delayed exploring; hoping that, without framing the question, it will be clearly answered for me the next time that Jesus appears. As we approach the end of the post-resurrection accounts, I feel that I can ignore this question no longer and must ask it. What is the nature of the body of the risen Jesus?

Perhaps the first clue comes even before the body has been seen and identified. In John's account of himself and Peter entering the empty tomb (John 20:5–10), we read that they saw and believed, but did not understand. But what had they seen, and what did it mean? The linen wrappings were lying there and, separately, there was the cloth that had been on Jesus' head. First of all, whoever had taken the body had not taken the cloths that Jesus was wrapped in, but Tom Wright suggests that with this unwrapping we are being pointed back to the account of the raising of Lazarus (John 11), when Jesus speaks about the resurrection.¹ But he explains that what happens with Lazarus is not resurrection, but just a form of resuscitation: bringing Lazarus back to life. Lazarus will face death again and Lazarus had to have the body coverings removed from him by Jesus.

Second, Wright argues, the way that the clothes had been laid out suggested that the body hadn't been unwrapped, but it was as if the body had been pulled out, or extracted, from the wrappings. The body appears to be able to pass through the wrappings with the same ease with which it will then go on to pass through locked doors.

The post-resurrection accounts introduce us to something completely new: the resurrection body. The scientific criteria which I want to use to make sense of the post-resurrection appearances just don't seem to work for the body of the risen Jesus. I want to clarify whether it is a physical body or a spiritual presence. It is clearly not a physical body, in the way that I would want to understand this, because it can pass through body wrappings and locked doors and can appear and disappear at will. At the same time, it appears to be a physical body; it can break bread, eat fish and have its wounds touched.

What does the risen Jesus look like? His wounds can be seen at times, but be invisible at other times. His features don't seem to be physically recognisable until after Jesus has been recognised in some other way. I need to find some other criteria, compared with my usual ones, to define the nature of the resurrection body.

Paul helpfully tries to make sense of this dilemma (1 Corinthians 15:35–50), with the analogy of the seed which will grow into wheat or some other grain. Usually what grows doesn't look at all like, or have any similar properties to, the seed that has been planted and given it life. A seed needs to die and be buried before it can grow into what it is intended to become. This transformation is what we observe with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Similarly we, too, will need to die and be buried before God gives us our resurrection bodies.

Paul goes on to say that what is sown is perishable, but what is raised is imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42). The resurrection body is not subject to death or corruption; it will not wear out and it is not powered by food or drink. Certainly, from the Emmaus road and Galilee accounts, the resurrection body can eat bread and fish, but it doesn't need food to fuel it. Paul goes on to say that it is sown as a physical body and it is raised as a spiritual body. This is where we, Christians of the last few centuries, encounter a problem; we have lost sight of how the Jewish people and then the early Christian communities would have understood this.

The real difference, as Paul will go on to say (1 Corinthians 15:47–49), is that ‘the first man was from earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.’ Our more recent understanding has re-imagined spiritual as ghostly and not physical. Jewish thinking never had the separation between a physical body and a soul that has developed in recent western thinking. Resurrection was always about the resurrection of a physical, but transformed, body.

When someone dies we will often say, ‘Rest in peace.’ Many will also add, ‘And rise in glory.’ The impact of Enlightenment thinking upon Christianity has produced an understanding of Christians going to heaven when they die, where they could rest in peace. The message has become that we escape our physical bodies, and this planet, and take up a spiritual (non-physical) residence in a separate, spiritual, place called heaven. This was never the understanding of Christians until recent centuries. The original vision was that on death we would, in some form, take up temporary residence, where we can ‘rest in peace’ before the end times come, with the second coming of Jesus. This is in the ‘many dwelling-places in my Father’s house’ (John 14:2) or in ‘Paradise’ (Luke 23:43), based on an Arabic word and concept of shaded gardens with cool flowing streams. Then, when the new creation occurs, we then will ‘rise in glory’ and be given our resurrection body.

This presents our rational scientific minds with a lot of questions but, then again, if you told scientists and engineers 50 years ago about the internet or microchips or about some of the (almost) everlasting materials that are available now, I think they would have had similar problems. Recent scientific developments can give helpful analogies in understanding the concept of ‘rest in peace and rise in glory’. Tom Wright,² while stressing the redemption of creation, and that our resurrection bodies are the transformation of our old bodies and not merely the replacement, précising material from John Polkinghorne,³ speaks of God downloading our software on to his hardware, until the time when he gives us the new hardware to run the software again. In this analogy, storing of our ‘software’ on his ‘hard drive’ corresponds with ‘rest in peace’ and the gift of the new ‘hardware’, our transformed resurrection bodies, corresponds with ‘rising in glory’.

The Christian understanding of those first disciples and of the church throughout most of history is that the risen Jesus, with his resurrection body, is the ‘first fruit’ of the new creation and that God’s new creation comes from the future to meet us, here and now, in the person of the risen Jesus. But to really understand the concept of our resurrection bodies, and most of what I have said so far in this chapter, we need to understand what is meant by the new creation.

The apostle Paul uses the analogy of the grain of seed being transformed into a plant. Are there other analogies that you can think of which would be helpful to you in describing how physical bodies are transformed by God into resurrection bodies?

Notes

1. Tom Wright, *John for Everyone Part 2* (SPCK, 2002).
2. Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (SPCK, 2007), p. 175. Tom Wright does acknowledge here that some people don’t find this analogy helpful. For a further discussion of these issues, *Surprised by Hope* does present a very comprehensive overview of the complex issue of resurrection bodies and the new creation.
3. John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (SPCK, 2002).

2 New creation

The Bible begins with the account of God creating the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1) and God acknowledging that creation was very good (Genesis 1:31). We soon read about the fall, or the breakdown in relationships between God and people, people with themselves, people with other people and people and creation. The Bible ends with the new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, with the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven so that the home of God will be among mortals and God will dwell with them (Revelation 21:1–3). This is the truth that we affirm when we say The Lord’s Prayer, that prayer which Jesus taught his disciples to say, and use the words, ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven.’

The early church believed strongly in Jesus’ second coming, which would herald the new creation, and this belief has existed through most of Christian history; it has, however, been pushed to the margins of mainline Christian belief since the Enlightenment.

It is a big topic to do justice to in a book, let alone in one section of this chapter, but removing the belief in the new creation has huge implications upon our understanding of God’s ultimate purposes and what God expects of us. I will mention some of the biblical verses that point towards the new creation, and one that, falsely in my opinion, has been used to counter this view and then explore some of the implications.

We read about the vision of the new heavens and new earth in Isaiah 65:17. The understanding of the resurrection of the dead was held by the Pharisees and most of the Jewish people, but not the Sadducees; the Sadducees only looked to the first five books of the Old Testament and were not influenced by later writers such as Isaiah and the development of Jewish thinking that occurred during the Babylonian exile. The early church would have this Jewish hope in the new creation and believed that Jesus, with his resurrection body, was the first fruit of the new creation. They believed that in the resurrection of Jesus, the future, the age to come, had broken into the present. His resurrection body was the forerunner of the resurrection bodies we would all have as part of the new creation.

Paul implies a belief in the new creation in much of his writing, but spells it out more directly in Romans 8, where he speaks not just of us awaiting our new resurrection bodies but says ‘that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay’ (v. 21) and goes on to speak of the birth of the new creation: ‘We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now’ (v. 22). Peter reminds his readers of Jesus’ promise that ‘we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’ (2 Peter 3:13).

The verse that has been used to suggest that ‘we go to heaven’ rather than ‘heaven coming to earth’ is 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where Paul says, ‘Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.’ One interpretation, known as the rapture, assumes that Jesus and those caught up in the clouds go back with Jesus to heaven, presumably leaving the earth to be destroyed. This assumption would, of course, contradict the vision of the new creation and heaven coming down to earth that Paul describes in Romans 8.

So how should we understand 1 Thessalonians 4:17? The imagery of the Bible, both in describing the ascension and the Son of Man going up in clouds (Daniel 7), suggests a flat earth with heaven existing above the earth, rather than heaven being a different dimension to our three-dimensional world. Tom Wright states, with regard to the Thessalonians, ‘They are like Roman citizens in a colony, going out to meet the emperor when he pays them a state visit, and then accompanying him back to the city itself.’¹ Jesus’s second coming heralds the new creation and Jesus brings heaven down to earth. Jesus coming to reign among us can be compared with the emperor returning to rule his people and being welcomed

accordingly, outside of the city gates, before returning with his people to the city. Paul paints a picture of the returning Jesus being met in the skies, outside of the earth, before they return with him to earth, where he will rule, rather than going to heaven with him.

If we take away the belief in the new creation, we are left with a world that was created by God and affirmed by God as good, but then became fallen. Instead of God redeeming his creation, he allows his creation to be destroyed, or destroys his creation, and our ultimate destiny is to escape from earth with spiritual rather than resurrection bodies, to live in heaven. This is the belief that, almost by default, we have been largely encouraged to accept in recent centuries. Which understanding of the end times we have makes a huge impact upon how we understand what Jesus was asking his disciples to do when he commissioned them, and the implication for us.

If the plan is that this world just ends, and certain people escape to a spiritual existence in heaven, then the sooner we can help this world to end, the more we are helping God bring about his planned conclusions! If wars wipe out humankind, or global warming destroys the earth, or the earth's resources are all used up with none available for future generations, or pollution, disease, poverty and famine mean that human life ceases to be sustainable, then that ushers in God's plans more rapidly!

Then again, if God intends to redeem and renew his creation and for Jesus to come to rule, so that 'thy will is done on earth as in heaven', our calling is to be cooperating with God in ushering in his new creation. Looking back at the relationships which broke down, within what we describe as the fall, everything that we can do to help restore those broken relationships is helping to prepare for the new creation.

Our calling is to: help restore people's relationship with God so that they can repent and find forgiveness; bring about reconciliation; help bring people back into full relationship with other people, and groups and nations back into full and harmonious relationships with other groups and nations; bring about the justice and righteousness that God seeks; transform the unjust relationships which exploit people; heal physical, mental and spiritual disease so that people's dis-ease with themselves is healed; bring back humanity's relationship with the whole of God's creation – this would include tackling the causes of climate change and pollution. To do this means denouncing the idols of our day, which are represented by the worship of power, greed and lust, all of which destroy the relationships which God wants restored.

Our calling is not just to do these in the short term, because it would be a nice thing to do while we wait for the earth to come to an end, so that we can escape it to heaven. We are called to do this because it is helping to usher in the new creation. But there are huge forces at work to counter this vision of the new creation. The idols of power, greed and lust have a lot invested, and a lot of money to be made, in exploiting the world's resources, exploiting the world's disagreements and selling arms, exploiting the world's broken relationships and exploiting our broken relationship with God. Perhaps it is because there are such powerful forces at work to counter this vision that we have found ourselves opting for the 'destroy the earth and go to heaven' option instead! It is because God wants us to be co-workers with him as we prepare for God to usher in the new creation that Jesus commissioned us, as part of his church, in the ways described in the previous chapter.

What are the implications, for you, of a belief in a new creation for the way in which you live out your life as we await the second coming and the new creation?

Notes

1. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (SPCK, 2002).

3 Ascension

A church that we used to worship at hosted the annual Good Friday Churches Together service, following the March of Witness. One year, during the first hymn, our pipe organ produced a horrible groan and appeared to give out its last breath. Fortunately, the service could continue on a piano that was also available within the church. Going to church on Easter Sunday, we expected that we wouldn't be able to get the full Easter joy into our singing with the piano but, it seemed miraculously, the organ had come back to life and we celebrated Easter appropriately. Was I the only one who went to church on Ascension Day full of anticipation as to how the organ might behave, and whether or not it would remain rooted to the ground? But the organ had been resuscitated for Easter Day; it hadn't been resurrected and so it stayed firmly in place for the Ascension Day service. It did, however, breathe its last shortly after that and was replaced with an electronic organ.

A few years ago, the then-vicar of our current church introduced the practice on Ascension Day of ending the evening service by launching a rocket. It probably adds one or two people, including some children, to what is usually a poorly attended service. Analogies can be helpful, but usually only work to a certain extent. You can only hope that whoever discovers the burnt-out shell of the rocket isn't aware of what the rocket was meant to represent until it reached the pinnacle of its journey upwards!

I have memories of worshipping in a chapel dedicated to Jesus' ascension. On entering this chapel for the first time you would be struck, hopefully metaphorically rather than literally, by the legs that hung down from the ceiling. My imagination wants to explore above the ceiling to discover if the rest of Jesus is there. But, while below the ceiling we have the earthly realm, above the ceiling represents the heavenly realm. So, in my imagination, I realise that the rest of Jesus is there, in the heavenly realm, but is beyond my sight.

We are trapped in our three-dimensional understanding of the world to only be able to think in three dimensions. In biblical times the earth was assumed to be flat, so the Bible visualises heaven as existing above us as an extra dimension. The understanding of the earth being spherical, rather than flat, shows us the limitations of such a perspective. We need to understand heaven as being an extra dimension, that we can't see or visualise, in addition to our three-dimensional world. The resurrected Jesus can exist both in our world and within this heavenly dimension; both on earth and in heaven. Jesus' vanishing and reappearing is when he moves from the earthly dimension to the heavenly dimension and back again.

The ascension marks the moment when Jesus feels that his earthly ministry has been completed. It is when Jesus completes his meetings with his followers within the earthly dimension and moves back to the heavenly dimension, where he will remain until the end times and his second coming. As with the stories of the empty tomb, we have angels present. They give a message to the disciples that Jesus could have given in person, but they mark the next rite of passage in Jesus' life. We are reminded that in the ascension, we have an event of similar significance to both the birth and the resurrection of Jesus.

Luke presents us with two accounts of the ascension. In most ways, the version in Acts is fuller than that at the end of Luke's gospel, so we tend to ignore Luke's gospel account. It does, however, add some extra elements. Here we read: 'And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God' (Luke 24:49-53).

We will consider worship in the next section, but here I will focus upon the great joy that they experienced. Jesus' post-resurrection appearances begin with the absence of the physical Jesus and

great confusion, despair and fear. The post-resurrection appearances end with the absence of the physical Jesus and, although this great joy is not referred to Act's account of the ascension, they end with great joy. Although Jesus will no longer physically be with the disciples, they have been promised that Jesus will send his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to be with them. As we follow some of their stories in Acts, we will see how these disciples have changed since the despair after the crucifixion; we will see that they don't have all of the answers by any means, and will need to continue to learn and find Jesus in new ways, but they experience joy because they are assured that Jesus is in control and will be with them in a new way. They don't yet have the gift of the Holy Spirit – they will need to become twelve again and wait upon God's timing for the right moment for that experience – but they do experience joy.

It is because of their great joy, and the confidence which underlies their great joy, that we can share in this confidence and great joy. We might find times when we are aware of the absence of Jesus; we might experience times when we are waiting for evidence of the Holy Spirit as a gift that Jesus has sent upon his church, but we are inheritors of this great joy. The post-resurrection accounts are the story of how the disciples are taken from the confusion, despair and fear caused by the loss of Jesus to the joy and sense of expectation that comes from knowing that they have the secrets of how to find, and be empowered by, the risen Jesus.

How can you share the great joy that we have as a result of our faith, in ways that do not appear as superficial to non-Christians?

4 Prayer and worship

The account of the ascension in Luke's gospel ends with the disciples worshipping Jesus and blessing God in the temple. I find that my understanding of worship and prayer is enriched by thinking of that sculpture of the ascending Jesus. That plaster sculpture represents a Jesus who can not only exist both on earth as in heaven, but also freely move from earth to heaven and back again. In my prayerful reflections I find that I am free to push Jesus up, further into heaven, or to pull him down further into the earthly realm. We read of the disciples taking hold of Jesus' feet and worshipping him (Matthew 28:9); there are references in the psalms to worshipping at God's footstall (Psalm 95:6; 99:5; 132:7). In my prayers and worship, I can become like the women who wash Jesus' feet with their tears (Luke 7:36-38) or anoint his feet with expensive perfume (John 12:1-8), I can cling on to Jesus feet.

By clinging on to Jesus' feet, it is as if I can pull him back to earth to be with me so that I can experience Jesus standing beside me. In my pain and need and in my intercession and worship, I can sense the physical presence of Jesus, with his feet firmly planted on the ground beside me. He might be encouraging or affirming me and telling me what I should do, or he might just be there listening while I hold on and worship him. But also, by clinging on to his feet, in my joy and worship, I can allow him to lift me up heavenward so that as his body vanishes into the heavenly realm, I can get close enough to hear the worship of heaven, or possibly gain a little glimpse of that dimension and experience a foretaste of heaven.

We are given a pointer towards this when Jacob had a strange dream at Bethel of angels ascending and descending a heavenly ladder, which formed a portal between earth and heaven (Genesis 28:10-22). It was within this dream that God passes on his original blessing, which he gave to Abraham, to apply to Jacob. Part of this blessing is that Jacob's descendants will be a blessing to the nations. Jacob anoints the rock he had rested his head upon and declares that it is a house of God. The risen and ascended Jesus becomes for us that house of God, that place where heaven and earth meet, the heavenly ladder, the portal between heaven and earth. Jesus is the one who can stand beside us comforting us as we face our earthly concerns, and who can also lift us up to give us a foretaste of heaven.

I don't know how you conclude your prayers, who you address them to; I have always been in the habit of addressing my prayers, to God the Father, through Jesus Christ. I believe that I am prompted by the Holy Spirit to pray to God the Father, through Jesus Christ the Son. I do this because Jesus is the one who has been incarnate and fully understands our human condition, but who also dwells within the heavenly realm. Jesus is the one who can interpret my inadequate words and strangely formed thoughts and feelings to God the Father within the heavenly realm.

Jesus is also the lens that we possess to make sure that we are aiming our prayers at God the Father rather than at a god who we have created in our own image. Psalm 115 highlights the dangers of creating our gods and worshipping them. With regard to creating and worshipping false gods we are warned, 'Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them' (v. 8). Another way of stating this is: 'We become what we worship.' This is why the message against idolatry comes over so strongly in the prophets. It is not just that prayers offered to idols are missed opportunities to pray to the living God, but by praying to false gods we become more like those false gods. If we worship the ways of the world, rather than God, we will find ourselves becoming worldlier. If we worship power, we will seek power rather than God; if we worship wealth more than God, we will seek wealth; if we worship worldly success, we will seek worldly success rather than seeking the true and living God.

Philip asks Jesus how we can know God the Father and is told, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9). Offering our prayers to the Father should require us to look at Jesus' example and teaching to check out whether what we are praying for and what we are worshipping is really the God who is

revealed to us in Jesus. This should be a way of avoiding idolatry and of helping us to become more like the God that we worship, who is revealed to us through Jesus.

I am strangely encouraged by the last reference to worship in Matthew's gospel. It reads, 'Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted' (Matthew 28:16–17). Even in doubt, the appropriate response is still to worship.

I believe that in both prayer and worship we can be put in touch with Jesus in new ways and experience him at work within our lives. Worship and prayer can move us on from doubt to new and stronger understandings of Jesus at work in our lives and in the world.

The ascension marks the end of the post-resurrection appearances, but also marks the beginning of the new relationship that the disciples, and ourselves, are offered with Jesus through our worship and prayer so that we can both experience Jesus' presence with us on earth, but also be lifted up to gain visions of heaven. Before this can be completed, the disciples need to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and there is one other thing that needs to happen before then. Jesus had chosen twelve disciples to represent the completeness of his mission to the twelve tribes of Israel, but Judas had killed himself. Jesus, representing Israel, needed to become complete again. It would only be after a twelfth disciple was appointed that the Holy Spirit would be given. The period between Ascension and Pentecost gives us a short pause, but there are still some issues to reflect upon as we await the gift of the Holy Spirit.

How do you use Jesus as a lens to make sure that your prayers to the Father, through Jesus the Son, are focused upon the Father that is revealed to us by the Son?

5 Losing Jesus

This series takes its title from the first words in John's account of the resurrection appearances, when Mary Magdalen, after discovering the empty tomb, tells Peter and John about this with the words, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him' (John 20:2). The post-resurrection appearances end with the ascension and the eleven disciples looking up at the ascending Jesus as he disappears from their sight for the final time. These two events, and all that occurs in between, are bookended by the appearance of angels and messages from angels.

Although we start without the physical body of the risen Jesus and we end without the physical body of the risen Jesus, somehow, with all that happens in between these two events, the attitude of the disciples has been completely transformed. They have been taken on an emotional rollercoaster, their faith has been challenged and their understanding of who Jesus is has been hugely changed. They have been given a new understanding of his purposes and, through this, of their purposes and they have been given their own responsibility and affirmation in their part of these responsibilities which are part of God's purposes.

Although the disciples are full of joy and hope after the ascension, that isn't always the way that Christians feel today. As we look around us at our world, our churches and the position of those churches within the world, there might be times when we might be tempted to repeat those words, 'They have taken the Lord,' and do so with that same sense of fear and despair experienced by the women at the empty tomb. Earlier I have mentioned that only a third of the population can be considered as churched, a third unchurched: having never had an understanding of the Christian message or a relationship with church. The remaining third are described as de-churched; those who once had connections with the church in some way, but no longer do so.

The temptation in a situation like this is to ignore the problem and hope it goes away; the reality is that if we ignore the problem, then it is likely that more Christians go away. The only real way forward is to try to identify what is happening and why. If we feel as if 'They have taken the Lord', then we first need to try to work out, who 'they' are. Having done that, we may be able to find the Lord again. Let us consider some of the 'usual suspects'.

Post- or late-Christendom: I mentioned at the beginning of the first chapter how the shops used to be closed on Good Friday, it also doesn't seem so long ago that nearly all shops were also closed on Sundays. Going back to when I was young, then, apart from going to church, there wasn't really much that was organised and open that you could do on a Sunday. There is now far less coverage of Christianity in the media and often the coverage that is there, in television programmes and newspaper articles, is negative, designed to mock Christianity rather than to affirm it. When church leaders speak out on issues, then much of the media will try to find ways to undermine their stance.

Many civic ceremonies or meetings used to begin with Christian prayer or worship, but that is gradually being eradicated. We hear of Christians being banned from wearing crosses, or other Christian symbolism, in the work place. The position of the church and of Christians has increasingly been pushed away from the centre. The Jesus who appeared to have quite a prominent position within our society and within our national events appears to have been taken away; so we might argue that it was the demise of Christendom that took the Lord.

Post-modernity: The Enlightenment gave us modernity and an understanding that there was a particular way of looking at things and, once this was discovered, then humans could make total sense of the world in which they lived; there was a particular narrative to be understood and defended. Christianity was part of this narrative. Post-modernity gave a voice and validity to the other narratives, the other ways of interpreting events. Generally, throughout history, it has been the victors who have

written the history and so the other narratives have been lost and forgotten. Post-modernity, which has increasingly evolved in recent decades, has affirmed the right of the different narratives to be heard.

One aspect of this is pluralism; we are increasingly exposed to the views of other world faiths. When you consider yourself the majority faith, then there is the temptation to not really take other faiths very seriously. There might be a feeling that if you are the majority, then it means that you are right. When you are in a minority, you know that you need to try to understand the other person's perspective before getting into any discussion. Christians have often been ill-prepared for discussion with those of other faiths. Christians, either because of a lack of understanding of their own faith or out a sense of guilt because of the arrogance of past generations, can easily retreat to an 'all faiths equally lead to God' position; an understanding that has more to do with Hinduism than Christianity. We could argue that pluralism has taken Jesus.

Over the years, Christ and Christianity have become increasingly marginalised from Christmas. Terms like 'Happy holidays', 'Winterval' and 'Season's greetings' have often replaced references to Christmas on Christmas cards. A few years ago an Education Authority decided that Christmas should not be celebrated at all within its schools as it was insensitive to other faith views. The local Muslim Associations made it very clear that Jesus is referred to and honoured in the Koran, Muslims have great respect for the Virgin Mary and they were very happy for their children to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas. The reality was that secular groups were very happy to try to use the 'religious sensitivity' argument to push a secular agenda.

Secularism is another aspect of the pluralism of post-modernism. Originally the word meant a divide between church and state, and was a counter to the blurring of boundaries that Christendom had caused. Increasingly we come across an aggressive secularism, which promotes an anti-religious agenda and, in a country once considered as Christian, an anti-Christian agenda. We could argue that secularism has taken Jesus.

Post-modernity has also opened society up to new ways of learning. Learning has moved from didactic to discovery. Modernity assumed that there was one story; one way of interpreting things, and that story should be presented to people verbally through a talk or lecture, or in written form through an article or book. Post-modernity encourages people to reflect on different narratives or interpretations and to discover truth for themselves. Churches are designed with pulpits so that the usual way of communicating is through a sermon which can be delivered 'six feet above contradiction'. If your way of learning has been shaped by post-modernity and the only way that Jesus is being presented is through a didactic methodology, then you have less opportunity to discover Jesus. We could suggest that non-didactic methodology has taken Jesus.

Generational issues: The move away from didactic learning to learning through discovery is obviously an issue that impacts upon different generations in different ways. The age profile of our churches shows that congregations are becoming more elderly and the church, if not Jesus, appears less relevant to younger people. There has been much written on the subject, but some key issues to consider, if the church is going to make Christianity more relevant to younger people, are that younger people are more likely to:

- be committed to Christ, rather than human institutions, such as the church;
- be more interested in mission, and issues such as global warming, than church meetings;
- hold together faith with other aspects of life, meaning that they are engaging with non-Christians and non-Christian values and seeking teaching which helps them explore this;
- value their own identity and are able to affirm diversity and aren't afraid of difference, being able to see a creative tension within diversity and generally good team players rather than needing to 'own and control' their own areas of responsibility;

- want to do and experience and reflect upon their experiences, rather than talking and studying;
- be open about their own vulnerability, and their needs, including for a healthy work/life balance, but needing affirmation;
- have a desire for truth and authenticity, with a hatred of hypocrisy, meaning that they question authority and want proof that leaders have the ability to lead.¹

If the church isn't moving in these directions, then it can easily appear as if, for a whole generation, Jesus has been taken.

What other factors, not mentioned here, might make it possible for people to lose sight of Jesus?

Notes

1. Stuart Buchanan, *Called by God?* (SPCK, 2008), pp. 31–32.

6 Finding Jesus

I enjoy 'whodunit?' detective programmes on television. With the two-hour versions, on commercial television, you know that during the second half of the programme you will be introduced to a succession of suspects. All have the motive, and all initially appear to have the opportunity to have committed the crime. When you reach the final advert break, before the programme's conclusion, you know that it was probably none of the suspects that have been introduced and considered so far. The real culprit will be revealed immediately after the advert break. Having considered some of the suspects, in the previous section, I can now attempt to reveal who I think took the Lord.

In this series I have gathered and considered the biblical evidence from all of those who witnessed the risen Jesus in the days immediately after the resurrection. I have tried to crosscheck each of their testimonies against those of the other witnesses and also considered some 'expert witnesses' from elsewhere in the Bible. I have carefully considered who has taken the Lord, but I have concluded that it wasn't abduction after all; it has been a case of mistaken identity!

The first clues come from the statements on Easter Day. The women at the tomb were looking for the crucified Jesus; that is why they couldn't initially recognise the resurrected Jesus. The disciples that Jesus met on the road to Emmaus described the Jesus that they were looking for. It was a Jesus who would redeem Israel. They were looking for a Jesus who would use his power to save their nation, a type of Christendom Jesus. Again, it was a case of mistaken identity; they were looking for the wrong Jesus.

If you think that Jesus has been taken, then I believe that something similar is happening. I suggest that the Jesus who you assume has been taken is not the risen Jesus; it is the Christendom Jesus. The risen Jesus continues to go where he wants and to meet with, and reveal himself to, whom he wishes. It isn't him who has been taken; it is the Christendom Jesus who we have lost. As the era of Christendom fades, and comes to an end, it should always have been expected that the Christendom Jesus would start to fade and be difficult to see and would then eventually vanish completely from sight.

The risen Jesus of the post-resurrection appearances was the same Jesus as the Jesus of the pre-Christendom era. The Jesus who was followed, worshipped and witnessed to by a persecuted minority on the margins of society, the Jesus who is still obvious to the persecuted and marginalised and who is still followed, worshipped and witnessed to by them – they know that he is still there and find him easily.

Remembering Jesus as our Passover, the construction of the Christendom Jesus is a bit like the time when the Israelites decided to build a golden image of a calf to worship instead of worshipping the true and living God. The Christendom Jesus is like an idol which has been built in our own image, formed of gold to make it look wealthy and important so that it embraces the ways of the world, rather than the ways of God.

To the world, the Christendom Jesus made of gold and wealth, was a beautiful object to look at and was the envy of the world, unlike the resurrected Jesus, who is disfigured by the marks of crucifixion and sacrificial love. The resurrected Jesus has always still been there; it is just that we have easily been dazzled by the gold of the Christendom Jesus: the Jesus who represents wealth, power, privilege and success. The good news is that as the Christendom Jesus fades and vanishes from sight, we are less likely to be dazzled and distracted by the Christendom Jesus and it becomes easier to see, recognise and follow the risen Jesus.

And that, of course, is what the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus have been all about. Jesus was showing his followers where to look and how to recognise him after he ascended and vanished from their sight. Jesus knew that there would be times when we might feel that he had been taken and that we would need these lessons so that we would be able to find him again. The Christendom Jesus was

easy to recognise, because you didn't have any choice in the matter; he had to be believed in. Recognising and believing in the risen Jesus takes time because it is an experience and a journey and a gradual revelation. Meeting this risen Jesus involves letting go of a fixed vision of Jesus and recognising him in new places and re-interpreting the scriptures to understand better what he is doing in new places. Meeting the risen Jesus requires having our understanding challenged and expanded.

With Thomas, we can expect to recognise the resurrected Jesus when we respond to the invitation to touch the wounds. With all of the disciples, we can expect to hear about him when we take seriously the perspective of those who have been marginalised in society, like the women at the tomb. We can expect to meet the risen Jesus when we are in the Galilees of: our everyday lives; other faiths and world views; compromise and ambiguity.

A favourite experiment, conducted by physics teachers, is to place a lighted candle on a saucer and cover it with an inverted jam jar. Very soon, the flame goes red before going out. The flame needs oxygen to continue burning so is extinguished. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus explains that no one puts a lamp under a bushel (Matthew 5:15) because it wouldn't be seen. But if your 'bushel' is also airtight, then the lamp will go out. It is the same with the church and mission. If the church isn't involved in mission, then it goes out. The church needs the 'oxygen' of the world to continue burning; if our faith is kept in an airtight container, away from the oxygen of the world, then it too, can go out.

With the commissioned disciples, we will find that we encounter the risen Jesus when we, with the authority of the Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are sent with vulnerability as the Father sent Jesus to carry out Jesus' commission. I mentioned, in part 1 chapter 1, the sense of vulnerability that we experienced during our Good Friday Procession of Witness when the shops were opened and the empty streets were full of shoppers and the roads were full of traffic. Of course, the real vulnerability was that our Procession of Witness had actually become an act of witness to the world, rather than just to members of other churches! We realised that we might be seen by people who we knew who were out shopping; we might need to explain to our non-Christian friends what we were doing and why we thought that Good Friday, and what Jesus did was important. We might need to explain why, despite the narrative of what happened that day, we called it Good Friday!

It is in proclaiming the risen Jesus, be it to those who are familiar with the story, those who once knew it but have given up on it, or those who have never heard it before, that we find we need to re-evaluate who Jesus really is for us, and what we need to say about him in the context that we find ourselves in, that we gain new understandings about who Jesus really is for us. Teaching and making disciples is no longer a one-way process. As Peter brought Cornelius and his household to faith, Peter found that he was gaining new insights about God and his purposes. Being involved in teaching and making disciples in late/post-Christendom involves both parties in discovery.

It is when we take God's creation seriously, appreciating it for the wonderful, beautiful gift that it is, rather than seeing it as a resource to be exploited, that we will rediscover some of wonders of God revealed within his creation. It is when we show love for other people, including the unlovable, that we can get a better understanding of God's love for us. When we seek to transform and reconcile, we can find ourselves being transformed and reconciled. It is in helping people find Jesus's direction and forgiveness in their lives that we get back in touch with the Jesus who forgives and accepts us as we meet Jesus afresh at the foot of the cross.

In one of Matthew's accounts of Jesus' teaching, Jesus instructs the disciples not to stop the children coming to him, and says that 'it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs' (Matthew 19:14). In the paragraphs about generational issues, above, we may find pointers which will help us look at Jesus in a fresh way, to see following Jesus as being more about a movement than an institution, and being about discovering new insights rather than just being instructed. As with Jesus' comments to his disciples, we should expect to learn how to learn from younger people.

If we feel that ‘they have taken the Lord’, then I believe that in the post-resurrection appearances Jesus presented us with the clues so that we can find him again. The crucified Jesus needed to be taken so that the disciples could meet, discover, worship, understand and follow the risen Jesus. The Christendom Jesus needs to vanish so that we can fully understand, worship and follow the risen Jesus, and not confuse him with the Christendom Jesus. The risen Jesus needed to ascend, so that he and the Father could send his Holy Spirit to guide and assist us in fulfilling his commission, the commission to prepare for Jesus’ second coming when he will rule in his kingdom here on earth, as in heaven.

What are the implications for you when you affirm that Christ has risen? What are the differences, if any, in how you have answered this question now, compared with answering it in part 1 chapter 1?