

The City Parish of St John the Baptist Cardiff

LENT TALKS 2010

**THE DIFFERENCE  
IN BEING A  
CHRISTIAN  
TODAY**

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us more than enough to make us well, to turn us into better persons. We receive in abundance, so that we can share freely and joyfully with those outside the fellowship of believers – back to the ‘church for others’ of last week.

No matter how hard we may feel it is to change, or too late for us, in God's providence it's never too late. *“Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation”* - the day of awakening to faith, hope and love that leads to making all things new in our lives, even when our next step is into the ultimate freedom of eternity.

This is what being Christian is all about. This is the difference it makes in a world that has unwittingly made the living God into something of a stranger. But part of the problem is that we have become estranged from the spiritual dimension of our true selves, blunted by the onslaught of materialism and materialist ideas day by day.

We rely too much on what we can know, see count or touch, or what others convince us can be known, seen counted or touched. Yet there is so much about existence that is unknown, both about the depths of ourselves and infinity of creation, held in being by the embrace of divine love.

Does our prayer embrace things unseen? The Cloud of Unknowing as well as everything we rightly know and concern ourselves with? What does it mean to root our existence in eternity, to have our hearts set on realities beyond this world? Does not love persuade us to believe that this is far more than nonsense, as it is dismissed by today's contemptuous deniers of living faith? Have we lost that ancient hunger to *‘be forever’* to outlast the dissolution of our bodies, through the ultimate embrace of our Maker?

We live on earth somewhere between God either in the depths, or above and beyond us; and God among us, and in each other. Prayer allows us to embrace and be embraced by both these dimensions of reality, in that complete freedom promised to all who know they are children of God, with an eternal destiny to be fulfilled. From that freedom of spirit flows such abundant life to rejoice in, here and now, and for ever after.

Let this be the source of your faithful discipleship, the difference being a Christian makes. And be assured, God does all the rest.

## 1. Who do you think you are?

If anyone challenges us, or deliberately annoys us, we may well turn upon them and say: Who do you think you are? We question the power of someone to make us feel less than good about ourselves, unless we are totally robbed of self confidence by life's hard knocks.

'Who do you think you are' is also the title of a TV series exploring family history. Genealogical investigation is a popular past time. Many want to see where they and their ancestors fit in the big picture of history, give an account of themselves and their position in society today. It's arisen due to ease of access to old records via the internet in this era of high social mobility.

Established communities are breaking up, people living alongside each other, hardly knowing each other's names or recognising neighbours on the street. We hear of individuals without family lying dead for months in apartments, surrounded by neighbours who don't know them, and have little interest in getting to know them. Loneliness is a curse of the age. It goes with having no sense of belonging, no longer feeling at home, even in places one might regard as home territory. Striving to discover one's ancestors can be a remedy against identity loss, rootlessness, loneliness.

I had a priest friend who after years of agonising went through gender reassignment procedures, and has lived in the identity of a woman for thirty years, having grown up 'trapped inside a male body'. Neither family history, nor a role within the church had conveyed that necessary sense of identity which afforded her both security and freedom to be.

Social expectation and pressure on gay people can lead to unhappy marriages in conventional family life, hiding what they feel is their true selves until driven to break-down or break-up by a crisis of personal affection. Condemning people for exceptional decisions made as they strive for honesty in seeking personal security and freedom to be is both cruel and unhelpful. It dismisses personal suffering as a moral lapse or a psychological condition, rather than asking what the best course of action might be to help them overcome their suffering.

When scripture speaks of God comforting suffering people, enjoining us to do likewise it uses a word which in Hebrew means 'to allow space for' That space is freedom to be, freedom to become, who you can be in God's eyes. It's self-realisation, self-fulfilment unbounded by human demands or expectations, rooted in relationship with our creator.

Our personal identity is shaped by relationships with people in various aspects of our lives. Family and community are essential to who we are. Yet, the more we look at who makes up our family and community, the more we discover how unique and varied are the relationships and those involved. It's never been unusual for a family to include others who aren't blood relatives. In some cultures, surrogate parenthood and fostering children is a social norm that helps to bond a community. It's not an emergency extension of the welfare state as with us.

The stories people tell binding them in belonging together are varied. Those who have greatest interest in stereotyping families into an average unit hope to make maximum profit from selling them consumer products. Advertising promotes the illusion of ideal types of people, families and groups to convince us of what's acceptable, stylish, desirable to consume. Projecting the right outward image is supposed to put you in control of who you are, what you want to be. Everyone becomes actors on the stage of life, with all the deep insecurity that stage exposure bestows.

In the relative anonymity of the internet, you can pretend to be anyone you want to be, either in elaborate role play games or in chat rooms where millions socialise in search of communication with others sharing common interests. While this can be entirely innocent and a genuine pastime, it can also become a pretence with dangerous consequences. The great fear of the digital age is identity theft – criminals stealing your name, address, bank account details, using them to rob you of your wealth, or even commit crime in your name.

Modern security practice in this impersonal bureaucratic society makes increasing demands that we prove whom we say we are, to officials who wouldn't know us if we passed them in the street. Most of us find all this distressing, even humiliating, if we've grown up in real community where we knew and were known by neighbours, friends, families. Security questions, the requirements of proving our identity over and over again, can assault our confidence in who we are in relation to others. Society seems to have made strangers of us without our consent. In all sorts of different ways, who we think we are in this world is scrutinised like it never has been before.

What makes us, secures our identity, is the stories that close personal relationships tell about us. The facts - that I am a son or daughter, that I am a sister or brother to someone, or a father or mother, or aunt or uncle to children, are the most enduring things about us. We may have choice about being parents, but no choice about the family we belong to.

It means a complete break with religious tribalism that was the norm before Christ. We're all set free to enjoy the fullness of life, with all its contradictions, challenges, triumphs and pleasures, enfolded in the intimacy of divine love. There's just one thing about the freedom for which we are set free. It's ours because in the Lord's own words "*The truth will set you free.*" The truth of God in relation to man, revealed in the life, but more supremely in the death of Jesus.

We have to face the truth about ourselves, the kind of person I am, and how I respond to all the changes and chances of fortune as life passes. We have to face the truth about the world we live in, and the mess we are part of, even if we think we don't have any great responsibility for things being the way they are. We are contributors, part of the problem, before we learn how to become part of the solution to saving the world. All of us are capable of colluding with injustice, with self-centredness, with insensitivity and lack of compassion for others, with championing illusory lost causes, in religion or society, because the truth requires such effort and sacrifice. This may seem impossible, until we recognise that our inner spiritual wounds weaken us too.

We do things wrong and hurt others. Wrong things have been done to us, and we have been hurt. Sometimes we haven't even noticed wounds we have sustained, wounds that weaken us, wounds that prevent us from seeing and thinking clearly. Wounded emotions, ideas, motives. Wounds from the distant past, as well as close at hand. All need a measure of healing only God can give. We are used to admitting our sins and failures to God, but do we also take all our woundedness to God in prayer? As long as we aren't healed, we aren't completely free.

It is argued that it takes us a lifetime, maybe more to heal completely, in soul and spirit and body. What matters is that we travel in that direction, point ourselves to where God can deal with both our sin and all the wounds sin has inflicted upon us. God's grace exceeds our failures. We can become as free as God intends. It's a matter of accepting the truth, summoning the will to let ourselves be changed by God's gracious love. What starts with the change of heart ends in deeds that make the world a better place.

We live in times when therapies, self-improvement plans, advice, even personal coaching are marketed as commodities to make us better, more well adjusted individuals. A church that is truly what God would have it be, is a place where community prayer and truthful living together in God's love are the healing transforming remedy. God gives

Relationships allowing individuals to flourish to fulfilment while joined to each other by bonds of affection in community life marked the growth of the Apostolic Church from the outset. *“By this shall all the world know you are my disciples, that you love one another.”* said Jesus, as he bade his friends farewell. *“See how they love one another.”* people remarked about the first Christians.

Yet, it's clear that this didn't mean that disciples of Jesus got on with each other perfectly without disputes and conflict. They were from many different backgrounds and cultures and had to learn how to live together, respecting and valuing each other, not avoiding each other and pretending to be nice to keep up the public image.

Christian disagreements have led to divisions, persecutions shameful cruelty and injustice crippling relations between believers. It's hard to understand how this figures in God's plan and purpose, unless we admit that God may simply allow us to behave badly, so that we may learn for ourselves how to do better.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul has to tackle the problem of a group of conservative disciples who think that any gentile male baptised into Christ should also be circumcised and keep the Law, like any proselyte convert to Judaism. It's clear to Paul this group hasn't understood the essential meaning of a Gospel message that offers a renewed personal relations between us and God.

*“For freedom Christ has set us free”* he declares. Nobody is compelled to behave like a Jew in order to follow Jesus. The Lord comes to meet us where we are, to free us from fear, shame and guilt, to live renewed lives where we are. God is confident that through our acceptance of his love and forgiveness, by the grace of his Spirit our lives will be transformed and become acceptable. There's no need to try and become what we are not naturally. God accepts us as we are and for what we are.

If our lives are wildly at variance to his will and purpose when he comes to meet us, that doesn't mean condemnation or destruction, as it did under the ancient law of Moses. *“There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* That is to say, no condemnation for those who have accepted God's love and forgiveness, those who understand that Christ's death put an end to the old tribal need to conform tightly to a set of religious rules and offer sacrifices to have transgressions erased. The God Jesus reveals does not trade favours with us. He offers us a place with his children. It's up to us to learn and take to heart the fact that grace is free and undeserved.

Choice and circumstance combine to forge relationships with spouses friends, schoolmates, colleagues, church or neighbours. Personal identity is shaped and secured by the totality of our relationships with others. When these break down or come to an end, who we think we are is challenged more profoundly than by these alien security procedures.

All sorts of things happen in our personal lives to make us feel insecure about ourselves. News media and advertising alike rely on their ability to feed our sense of insecurity in order to grab our attention for their product. We have to be very confident to overcome the anxiety generated around us, and not be distorted by such negative influences.

Bernard Malamud's novel 'The Fixer' is set in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia when anti-Jewish pogroms made life hell for thousands of decent citizens. The novel's hero is accused of a crime he didn't commit. His only crime is being born a Jew and he's not even a practicing Jew. He's offered better treatment, an end to captivity if he converts to Christianity. He refuses insisting *“I am what I am”*. Nothing else. His misery continues as his captors try to break him by undermining his dignity. Because he holds out against this torture his treatment worsens. His captors abuse him like a poor animal, less than human. He resists all assaults, repeating to himself day and night: *“I am a man, I am a man, I am a man.”* It's one thing remaining he is sure of, when his identity as a true Russian, a citizen, a useful tradesman has been denied because of his Jewish ancestry.

Jesus is before Pilate the morning after his betrayal. Tortured, publicly humiliated and thrashed before execution. All Pilate can say after questioning him is, *“Behold, the man.”* Tested to the limit, alone, stripped of everything that secures his identity, his humanity is all Jesus has left. Like the Fixer. His only certainty is in knowing that he is God's own beloved one. His security comes from his prayer and openness to God in every circumstance.

In Malamud's story there's no reason for the Fixer to contemplate belief in the God of his own people from whom he is isolated, or the faith of his torturers. Both belief positions deny what he knows about his own essential human worth. God is there in the silent remoteness of his search to be himself, the God of Isaiah who 'hides himself' dwelling beyond our comprehension. This poor persecuted man knows how to love, to be of service to others, how to resist hatred and injustice,

simply being true to himself. The unknown, unseen, author of all, no matter how near or far away we might consider him to be, sustains in life anyone who lives truthfully, and strives to do no evil, no matter how hard pressed.

All traditional catechism schemes of Q&A used by Catholics, Protestants and Anglicans begin by focussing on who we think we are. Catholics begin questioning "Who made you?" to which the reply is "God made me" The Westminster shorter catechism asks "What is the chief end of man?" which we might interpret as "What are we living for?" Answer, "to glorify God and enjoy him forever", being a child of God is implied, and brought out later. Anglicans begin asking your name and how you received it. Straight away, naming is linked to the baptism in which God called and made us members of Christ, children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. Later, we learn that God the Father, creator of all in love, 'made me and all mankind'. Living by trust in One who made and loves us, calls us his children, secures us in who we are, gives us a constant frame of reference for everything else about our changing identity. It gives us a means to confront and overcome the anxiety generated by the world around us.

How vital it is that the church strives to recover the importance of Baptism not merely for its committed membership, but for all who bring children into this world, seeking the right way, longing for that sense of security which eludes them and exposes their anxiety. Baptism is at the core of the difference it makes being a Christian today, as it's one part of our identity that doesn't change, and isn't controlled or defined by relationships with others, but with our Creator.

As a church dedicated to John the Baptist, it is part of our special calling to promote baptism, to encourage anyone we can reach not to abandon this wholesome tradition of our forebears. The proposed font enhancement will afford a great opportunity to re-claim this mission to and set an example for others to follow. No matter how strong or weak, tried and tested, or just uncontested our trust in God may be, Baptism is something done to us, we can't do to ourselves. It is a sign anchoring us in relation to God. It is the foundation of who we truly are, a permanent marker running throughout our lives to the unshakeable meaning and purpose of life enfolded by His gracious love in Christ our Lord. It is a lifeline around which our trust and faith can grow and flourish.

## 5. For freedom set free

As human beings evolved and grew distinct from animals with the expansion and refinement of consciousness, the ability to think and use complex tools and language, we became self-aware of living and of death. Evolution of individuality is the latest phase of our continuing creation. For dozens of millennia, we evolved in group relationships. The individual was subject to, dependent upon the group. There was no life outside the group. Its laws and taboos served to protect, to give support to survival in danger, and growth in opportune times. Along with art and ritual, the use of stories as language developed, enabled clans, tribes groups to express their identity, and their understanding of the world.

The Biblical stories of the Creation and the Fall are part of that, responding to questions like: How did our world come into existence? What makes our environment shift from being a safe and harmonious environment to a hostile nightmare? What makes us change from being secure, and at home with ourselves and the world, to being anxious, afraid, angry and violent?

Such questions arose in a time when people seemed to be more sensitive to the spiritual dimension of their natural world. They had a deeper sense of awe and worship. They thought of God walking among them, as well as being above and beyond them. Scripture written over a period of 1,500 years shows how understanding God and God's ways changed, then changed again.

God's Word, God's will and purpose for us is conveyed to us through a body of writings that isn't set forever in how it's to be read and understood. Not like Moses' tablets of stone. Scripture makes us think, points us to God, opens heart and mind to God in a very living way.

Seven centuries before Christ, Greek Philosophers and others discussed the relation between their society and individuals. The idea of the immortality of the soul emerged. In this same period, the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah - raised in a very different culture - declared that each person was held accountable to God for their transgressions.

Within a society, clan or family that gave identity to its members. Jeremiah foresaw that God was forging a new kind of relationship with each individual in their hearts, a personal relationship. It was the beginning of self-understanding and the era we're part of. What began with Jeremiah flourished fully in Jesus, and the relationship between God and us, in loving relationship, revealed in him.

engage with something that enables them to look outside the charmed circle of faithful members, is a moment when being 'church for others' begins to take its place again in their common life.

The process of renewal and growth is never without its problems, because some fear change, or are afraid of themselves through loss of confidence, or harbour resentments and let them secretly sabotage the Spirit's work. It's not easy for everyone to let go and let God work, but following Christ in the Way, remembering how he worked, can help us face the truth of whether we are part of the problem a church faces, or part of the solution.

We may get it wrong, be afraid of admitting this to anyone, but by trusting in God's love for us, we can have a go at changing, tackling what we are reluctant to face. Fear can make us feel isolated and different from others. But in God's love, there's room for all of us. Whatever's unique and special about us and our gifts, fits in with everyone else's. There's a right place a role somewhere for everyone. Paul called us '*members of one another*' - those belonging to Christ's body the church.

It means, not only that we belong together, but that we need each other's gifts to bring the best out in us, and make our community what Christ calls it to be. A mutual interdependence that makes the whole greater than the sum of us, the parts. The body comes into its own the more it looks outwards to those not yet part of it, demonstrates a lively interest in all that is happening, and brings the world to God through its prayer.

The breakdown of traditional forms of community, new economic and mobility patterns make it difficult to settle down and grow into belonging somewhere. The openness of the body of Christ to welcome people, and take them to its heart without stifling them or imprisoning them in expectations, is an asset to cultivate and rejoice in.

The aim is not for *us* to catch new members, but to let people catch the love of God, let them know that they are loved and valued by Christ. The Holy Spirit holds the net, not us.

We never know what we contribute to those who pass through this church as visitors, or the few who join us briefly in worship before going their ways. We need people to know we are 'church for others' but again as Paul said: "*Is it not ourselves that we proclaim, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants, for Christ's sake.*" If we can keep that in mind we will find joy, peace and harmony as *members of one another*. And that will make the kind of difference today that being a Christian is all about.

## 2. About Jesus - Who is this man?

The first time I visited a Hindu temple I was surprised to see among many representations of the divine around the walls, a picture of Ghandi and a western icon of the sacred heart of Jesus. It was explained to me that Hindus see in Jesus the man and his teachings an image of the divine. It's less surprising if you think that Christianity was in South India over a thousand years before colonial traders and missionaries arrived from the west.

The Qur'an has stories about Jesus's birth and death and attribute some sayings to him. They draw from the fact that Christianity was one of several religions in the Arabian peninsula five hundred years before the angel Gabriel spoke to Muhammad and said 'Write this ...' I've heard Buddhist monks from Tibet challenge zealous westerners, enthusiastic to follow the noble eightfold path, to reconsider the example set by Jesus' self sacrificial suffering love and take it to heart, as a part of their own spiritual heritage they've neglected. While Jews have a long history of difficulty with the church's claims about Jesus, there are many rabbis with no problem about owning him and his teaching as one of their spiritual kindred.

There have been seers and mystics in all these religions who declare that they have met Jesus in all his divine glory in a spiritual vision, and embraced his teaching as part of theirs, even if they have not embraced Christianity. When you survey the larger picture you realise the extent of the impact of Jesus on God seeking people far outside Christianity. His words, deeds, his humanity – but also the divine life in him. This sense that he is the 'image of the unseen God', as Paul says in his Epistle to the Colossians. Others may not exactly agree with the church on the detail of what this means to them, but they witness to the unique difference Jesus made to the world of faith.

Everything about his story told in the first three Gospels poses the question 'Who is this man?' It invites everyone who hears about him to think, to make up their minds who they are, and where they stand in relation to him. It's evident there are ways to make up your mind other than the way Christian orthodoxy proposes.

Nobody is compelled to answer in one particular way. We're all free to determine our own personal answer, now that the most powerful churches have stopped persecuting and punishing those who think differently from themselves.

The disciples of Jesus were ordinary men and women whose lives were transformed by knowing him. His teaching rang true to them. He challenged them to be compassionate, and honest, to delight and marvel at the splendour of creation and the goodness of God, the author of life, true father to all his children. Jesus was able to draw upon a common spiritual inheritance in Judaism, to make it come alive for them in a fresh way, and lead them to new ways of understanding and relating to God.

All the sacred scriptures of the world's religions offer wise teaching on basic questions of the meaning and purpose of life, on what is most to be valued or avoided in life. Jesus made special use of stories – the parable is special, because it invites listeners to think for themselves, to use their own judgement and imagination to draw out and apply meaning to their own situation. He respected the intelligence of his audience. He was forthright with them if he thought they were deceiving themselves. His words don't need to be analysed for hidden secrets or magical power, only savoured for their ability to kindle imagination and open hearts to the work of God's Spirit.

What most impressed his followers about Jesus was his compassion for those who suffered and were excluded from ordinary life. In his day, healers, magicians and wonderworkers abounded. Some performed remarkable feats to uphold their claims to special powers. Wherever Jesus spoke about God's love and mercy, sick people he met were healed, either by direct or indirect contact with him. He was always interested in them and their suffering. He praised their willingness to trust. He didn't set out to prove himself as a man of power and wonders. Indeed, he often told people to keep quiet about their healing. He wasn't looking for clients, he was just there to invite people to follow, and share his adventure of faith in God.

Being with Jesus convinced his followers that he had a unique relationship to the God of their ancestors. Some began to call him Messiah, meaning Anointed One, a person God appoints and sends to heal and rescue a suffering world, ruined and trapped by the power of evil. The Messiah represented God's goodness, God's justice and truth at work re-creating the world order for the better. Popular belief held that a Messiah would be a larger than life person, or semi-divine, a sort of super-hero, a warrior king who would release the Jews from their captivity to Roman tyranny. Jesus showed all the courage, endurance and confidence of a heroic warrior, but his chosen way of action was uniquely non-violent – his only weapon was the truth, spoken in love.

Another sixties theologian, Walter Hollenweger, speaking of the missionary nature of the church, coined the phrase '*church for others*'. Church = body of Christ, the man for others, therefore church to be is truly Christ-like must be 'church for others', or as William Temple put it "*Church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of those who don't yet belong to it.*" The sense of openness to others that belonged to the apostles, should characterise the whole community of believers, their fellowship, their concern for the world outside their ranks, their zeal to engage with that world, seek God's presence active in it, point it out to others and declare the good news. This is what the Acts of the Apostles teaches.

The church does not set out to convert. The Holy Spirit accompanying its faithful members in their mission to others is the One who converts, as the good news is heard and understood. Paul tells people to '*preach the Gospel in season and out of season*', to take every opportunity to give a witness to faith in Christ, and serve others out of love for God, and no other ambition to succeed. Whenever the church grows it's because God is working in and through our efforts to share all we have received from others, and working in the hearts of those who join us in search of Him.

Within this broad embrace, we recognise that our world is broken and suffering. The life of the church doesn't exist apart from, or protected from this reality. Church members can be broken and suffering, church communities can be broken and suffering, not fit for purpose, unable to be truly the '*church for others*' they are called to be.

Each individual encountering Christ becomes aware of their sin and brokenness, and their need for forgiveness and healing. The same needs to happen to church communities, to denominations and institutions also, as they get buffeted and torn by the undermining of their confidence in Christ, by the weakening of their resilience in the face of disputes and controversies, by their inability to adapt to sharing Christ in circumstances that have changed with time. There's always room for repentance, reconciliation, revival and renewal – and many ways in which these can occur, not just in the stereotyped manner associated with crusades, or revivalist rallies.

There are movements that bring us back to the heart of contemplative prayer, which refresh our insight into the bible, which set us afire with new music and creative art, or recreate the majesty of ancient traditional forms of worship; movements which restore confidence and zeal by acts of service to others, especially to the poor, ignored and excluded; movements which champion just causes, promote peace making and trust building. They arise any time a tired and flagging congregation can

As certain people were inspired to take the message far and wide, they sought Apostles' blessing as evangelists, envoys of the good news about God and the Lord Jesus Christ. In the first years of the spread of Christian faith, that was it. Church organisation amounted to support for the impoverished and the sick, support for the itinerant messengers of the Gospel. Everyone who had known Jesus told stories about him, and joined in leading prayers, blessing bread and wine and sharing them in their homes, because that was what they did as Jews.

The Jewish professional priestly caste, offered sacrifices in the temple. If they dared become followers of Jesus Messiah, there was no special role for them. Each baptized person exercised pastoral care and encouraged each other. People openly confessed their sins to each other, prayed for forgiveness and offered each other support and guidance.

Down the centuries, as church organisations, institutions and new ministries evolved to serve the huge masses of people becoming believers, there cropped up, time and time again, the minority who were uncomfortable with this complexity and sophistication, who desired to roll the clock back and start again from scratch, imitating the church of the Apostles, desiring an authentic expression of communal faithfulness to the Gospel. Quakers, Bretheren, Amish and many free evangelical churches strive to achieve this ideal of simplicity. Ascetics, monks nuns, and hermits dwelling in desert solitude sought the same perfection. But such idealism doesn't recommend itself to us, or else we wouldn't be here.

When you look at the complex organisation and cultural diversity of the many forms of Christian church among the two billion Christians on planet Earth today, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Anglican, you have to ask what, apart from the bible prayer, baptism, eucharist, and ministry, is really their distinguishing unifying characteristic? What marks different churches out as authentic, genuine in following the way? It's simple but worth thinking about nevertheless.

Jesus was described by theologian Paul Tillich as a '*man for others*', a popular phrase in my youth, a man who lived his life and sacrificed his life so that others may be reconciled with God. You see it in his attentiveness to suffering people, or in those searching for the truth. You see it in his compassion for his mother and the beloved disciple as he hung on the Cross. You hear it in his words as they nailed him down, "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*"

People were in turn delighted, then disappointed, fascinated and threatened by him, because he did not meet their expectations or behave in conformity with their ideas of a man of God. He showed he could influence crowds, and be a focus for a revolt against authority, yet he refused to go along with the will of the people. Rather than inflict suffering on others, Jesus chose to accept suffering, submit to betrayal, rejection, abandonment, humiliation, torture and death, in defence of the truth of his teaching. During his life's terrible ending, he faced the darkness of evil inflicted upon him alone, only trusting in God. Trusting even when he felt God had abandoned him. He lived, to the end, his conviction that the world can only be rescued from the power of evil and violence by enduring, suffering its worst attacks in love, exercising the power of forgiveness.

As he breathed his last, one of his executioners remarked : "Truly this man was a son of God." Even a cruelty hardened soldier could recognise his high spiritual qualities as a man, seeing his endurance of suffering as evidence of holiness. Many people of different faiths, or no faith at all, see Jesus as a great brave man among mortals, a wise teacher among wise teachers, a man of healing compassion to rank with the great physicians of history and legend. A great original man. But why unique? Is it just the appeal of his message and example? Many would say so. However, Christians claim that there is more.

Crucifixion and burial in a tomb was not the end of Jesus' life. Different groups of his followers, numbering up to a hundred and twenty on one occasion according to St Paul, testified that they'd seen him alive again, three days after his death. They touched him, spoke with him, ate, drank and prayed with him. For them it marked a new beginning without precedent in human history. Jesus helped them understand God's purpose, explaining the meaning of his life and mission. Then he commissioned his disciples to share this message of good news with the world.

These experiences and the spiritual blessings emerging from them, led his disciples to say that Jesus is uniquely Son of God, distinct from the way any of us can be called God's children. In him St Paul says: '*the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily*'. To call him 'Son of God' in this sense is to claim he existed beyond space and time before his birth as a child of human parents.

In other religions and philosophies the life of Jesus is interpreted to portray him as a god in human disguise intervening in human affairs, or as this superhuman, semi-divine hero, or as an enlightened wise man. Christians in the mainstream of traditional belief, regard Jesus as God present in a free fallible, vulnerable, normal human being like each of us, but so totally

open in himself to divine life that he leads us to think differently about God's nature. He has been called the human face of God. Christians believe that relating to God through Jesus is a unique path to a fulfilling life, to health and freedom from evil and fear.

Jesus taught that God's love excludes nobody, but embraces humankind. Seen in the light of the life and teaching of Jesus, other religions and their teachings must be approached with reverence and respect, for this is how Jesus himself treated gentile believers who approached him.

The divine light and life revealed in Jesus shines through and is reflected in the teachings of Moses, Muhammad, and other great prophets, all who teach love, compassion, forgiveness, trust and surrender to God's will. The revelation to the world of God's truth and wisdom is not confined exclusively to the Gospels, but the Gospels set a unique standard.

Those who truly recognise and love Jesus as God's Son discover that God communicates his grace and love to others who don't believe as they do. There's no hindrance to Christians commending their faith to others. In fact, God's outgoing love in them drives Christians to do so, and to rejoice when finding faith in others different from themselves, just as Jesus did.

Jesus discussed the life of faith with fellow believers of his own religious tradition, with people of other beliefs, also with searchers for faith and truth to live by. His Gospel declared that God's grace is for all. His challenges and criticism were reserved for those who believed and trusted only in themselves. He called those who were wavering in faith to awaken to true life asking them 'Why are you afraid?' All are free to choose the path that leads them to fullness of life, and to help others find theirs, if we look carefully at the unique way Jesus enabled others to think of God and the divine plan for humankind.

The difference it makes being a Christian is this attitude of openness to recognise faith hope and love at work in others, no matter how different they may be from ourselves. It's a basis for trust building, working together for the common good. Many others who are non-believers may well share the same values and aspirations, but we can be thankful that all of us have learned this, due to Jesus' words and deeds, and the relationship with God he invites us into.

#### 4. Church for others, members of one another

So far, in thinking about the difference being a Christian makes today, we've explored something of the personal relationship we have with our Lord, and how this may influence the way we look at the world and other people. The preaching of Jesus gathered people around him. His good news from God sowed the seeds of a new community. People of different faith backgrounds admire Jesus the man, and strive to follow his teachings in their personal life, as individuals. But for some, discovering this good news awakens a desire to belong, to share their faith with others.

The disciples gathered around Jesus and followed him as a group. They shared a common purse, ate meals together, supported and encourage one another when Jesus sent them out to prepare for his arrival, or a celebration. After his death, the disciples first scattered, but then re-grouped, and mostly met him alive again when they were together. The experience of Pentecost bound them in a bond of mutual love and common purpose – to spread the good news, to sow the seeds of new faith communities wherever they travelled. Some stayed in and around Jerusalem, and maintained a home base of witnesses. Others travelled far and wide, returning to Jerusalem to report on what God has done with them on their journeys.

The church began, not as a divinely ordained organisation with management structures, but as a living expanding community, growing and adapting to new circumstances, working out the division of labour and responsibilities as they went along, improvising in the face of problems arising, and not always successfully. There were setbacks and disputes, but the Spirit used their difficulties, honestly faced, for learning, adapting and further growth.

The first appointed ministry in the Acts of the Apostles is that of Deacons, set apart, blessed with prayer to devote themselves to social work, caring for the deprived – poor believers, rejected from the list of deserving alms recipients for believing in Jesus the Messiah.

The eleven Apostles, with the addition of a twelfth, as a sign of completeness, represent followers of the Way of Jesus, understanding themselves as a 'new Israel of God', brought into being by the new Exodus / Passover of the Lord's resurrection. They were community spokespersons, the recognised official witnesses of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. They weren't the only people telling his story, but they were a single body of reference for teaching, to be referred to in the face of disputes, together a symbol of unity in the presence of the risen Lord.

be, and bear witness to in a broken and divided world. Yet it so often falls short of this by descent into fear, or efforts to organise God's grace in neat and orderly ways. The life in Jesus, the life of Jesus, is the life of God's Spirit poured out in the world, and for the whole world. It's closer to us than we are to ourselves, and it's there to be found in others as we follow his way.

The difference in being a Christian today lies in awareness of the deep roots of our own faith and the faiths of others, our willingness to see them, not as rivals but fellow pilgrims for God, despite differences between us. We're closer to people who strive to live by another faith, than we are close to anyone trusting their own powers, or believing that lies and violence can resolve any of the pressing problems of difference and distrust, impeding progress towards the world as God meant it to be. To live with courage and conviction by the Way of Christ in this manner, will certainly mark out the difference being a Christian makes in another way altogether, with many consequences for our life in the world. Are we up to this challenge?

*"If anyone would follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me"* is a familiar saying of Jesus about discipleship. He is honest and realistic about the demands his Way to the truth and life in God will involve. He speaks about a burden of suffering that must be faced up to and borne by anyone who faces others in truth, openness, trust and compassion. There will be the risk of misunderstanding, rejection, hostility, abuse and exploitation – good will mistaken for ill will, for any seeking to imitate Jesus with integrity. But despite this, God's grace prevails, evil will be overcome by good, through courage and faithful endurance. We're not born with these qualities. They are nurtured and grow in us as we stick to the path we've chosen. Beyond Jesus' suffering and death lay resurrection to new life. This thought can encourage and sustain all who shoulder the burdens arising from following Jesus.

At Easter and Confirmation services we renew the vows of baptism as part of the liturgical life of the faithful community. Our baptism is a sign of God's call to follow the Way, an invitation which we learn to say 'yes' to, time and time again, not just in a liturgy, but as we face a new day with the sign of the Cross, saying the baptismal words for ourselves, once spoken over us : *"In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* Let's think of them as a commitment, to the Way when we are confronted with each new challenge life brings.

### 3. Following Jesus - the Way the truth and the life.

The title of this Lenten series is 'The difference in being a Christian today', and it can be read just as what makes Christian believers stand out from their non believing contemporaries. It can also be read another way. Being a Christian *today* is different from being a Christian at others time in Britain when people of other faiths were insignificant minorities, and the church was prominent in culture and public life. In those days, distinction could be made between devout, committed disciples and nominal believers, who accepted the broad principles and worshipped when it suited them, comfortable and at home in a world established and run on Christian values.

Nowadays, those values, where still adhered to, are a legacy of the past in a world increasingly neutral and indifferent towards the propositions of religion. Fewer people than for many centuries are nominally Christian. Many more have renounced or never adopted Christian faith, or come from an entirely different culture and faith. This represents a huge difference in the circumstances that now surround every churchgoing believer. No longer do people go to worship automatically because everyone else around them considers it the thing to do. Now it involves a decision against a choice of alternatives, taking the effort and making the time to affirm and celebrate Christian identity, and it sets you apart from others like it didn't in times past.

Some people make the effort to come to church with commitment and devotion, but there are also those making the effort seeking a faith to live by. Explorers and enquirers, whose confidence in the reality of God may have taken hard knocks from the detractors of faith, yet they still search in places that are free and open to welcome their quest, and not impose any conditions on their presence. There were always enquirers and explorers, even in the days of soviet anti-religious propaganda. Is consumer materialist propaganda any more than the other side of the same coin, pressing reason and scientific discipline to justify hostility in most doubtful ways?

Whoever calls themselves a Christian today, or considers doing so goes against the grain of modernity, and opens themselves to challenges about their behaviour and actions at every turn. The problem for Christianity is that many aspects of modern life appear better reasoned and based on verifiable facts and common sense than much of what passes for religion. Many self-styled traditional Christians have retreated into a position where their beliefs about the world fall short reasonableness. This can be due to

an understanding about the authority of scripture, or beliefs about its teaching that are difficult to defend in the light of new findings about scriptural texts, or natural science. It happens in other religions too.

The whole matter of how sacred scripture of any kind is to be read and interpreted as a guide for shaping one's faith is a key question. It's difficult too, as few of us begin by looking at the assumptions we carry when we examine a text to seek its meaning for us today, thousands of years after its origin, and after so many other attempts to interpret it. We share a belief that sacred scripture is inspired by God. It's a nice idea, but how does it work? How are we meant to read in order to understand what God wants us to learn?

The history of reading scripture and interpreting it is a complex tale – few of us are going to take time to obtain this expertise. It's important to grasp that no single approach is adequate to help us. Christian tradition and Jewish tradition before it embraced different ways of interpretation and debated texts: were they intended to be taken as allegories, symbolic or literal in meaning?

Over the past two centuries the different kinds of literature contained in scriptural texts, have been analysed, revealing that their meaning is communicated to readers in varied ways. It's more complex than we may think, but not impossible to grasp. The church values not only scripture, but tradition (handing down of ways to understand the faith) and reason (embracing every kind of investigation and debate about the material of faith).

Nowhere are we asked to believe without reason what scripture reveals. We benefit by asking first, what sort of passage is this? How can we best approach its deeper truth? What we learn invites us to trust God, to trust Jesus and follow him. It's not blind faith, but belief tested and proved by experience. We don't need to be scholarly or intellectual, just willing to think with the best of our capacity, as wise and discerningly as we can. It means questioning every message coming to us assessing its value before deciding our response. What spiritual tradition calls discernment. It sets us apart from those willing to let themselves be persuaded by advertising or propaganda of any kind.

St John the Evangelist recounts that after the Last Supper, Jesus spoke about his departure to prepare a place for them. The meaning of his life and impending death was as yet beyond their understanding. It took doubting Thomas to be honest enough to say: "We don't know where you

are going, so how can we know the way?" He was a man concerned with discerning the truth. He, wanted to see Jesus' wounded body before agreeing that his resurrection was real.

Jesus declared: "*I am the Way the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.*" This has been taken to imply that the way to God for all humankind is exclusively through Jesus, that God can only be known by belonging to the church as the unique means of access to Jesus and the salvation God promised through him. '*Outside the church nobody can be saved*' runs the ruling declaration of western catholicism. Is it true? Does it even make sense?

There are many strands of scripture proposing that God has been known to people of many races and cultures before the Gospel, enabling people to feel after God and find him in their own way according to their own light. Christ comes and reveals the possibility of a way to God that all can access. The church exists to bear witness to Christ. It may often have claimed an exclusive right do this, but the history of faiths has shown that the Lord has not confined himself to being known wherever the church is established.

Jesus is known at the heart of the church that worships and witnesses to him, and also beyond it, in places where people have different expressions of faith, or seemingly no faith at all. '*Other sheep have I who are not of this fold*' Jesus said. He set the tone for this inclusiveness with his surprising declarations about the faith expressed by many non-Jews who came to seek his help.

*'I am the Way, the truth and the life'*. Many times in St John's Gospel, Jesus deliberately uses this phrase 'I am' to point to himself in a way reminding us of God's revelation to Moses in Exodus - '*I am, who I am*'. This Way, his Way is one of openness and inclusion, not of exclusion. All whom God created are meant to relate to him. Nobody is meant to be lost. And this Way is in contrast with existing religion practise with its in-groups and out-groups.

It's this practice of the Way, which can lead us to an appreciation of a higher, all embracing Truth connecting people, enabling them to live together with their differences.

It's this practice of the Way, that afford an experience of life together transformed by love, pardon reconciliation, breaking down barriers through God's grace. It's what the church at its best has always aimed to