

# *SOCIAL JUSTICE RETREAT*

**Peter Mc Verry s.j.**

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## *Introduction*

Good evening and welcome. I would just like to take this opportunity this evening to introduce myself and the programme which I am proposing for the next five days.

First, myself: I'm a Jesuit Priest, who has worked, since my ordination in 1975, with homeless young people in Dublin. I'll talk a little more about that tomorrow morning, to set the scene for the next few days. But just to say this evening that I have been totally, and radically, changed by them – they have turned me upside down, challenged my values, revealed to me some, at least, of my prejudices, they have taught me more about God than all my theology classes – though my theology lecturers might say that if I had attended more of their classes I would have learnt a lot more! – and they have changed my relationship with God. So everything I am going to say this week comes very directly from my involvement with those homeless people and my reflections on that involvement.

Some of the questions that arose for me in that work were: “What is the Good News which I have to bring to homeless young people?” As a social worker, yes, I can help them to get accommodation, drug treatment, counselling, but as a *priest*, as a minister of the Gospel, what is the Good News of the Gospel that I have to bring? Is it that God loves them and there will be a place for them in Heaven? While that is certainly true, I think their concerns are much more immediate.

A second thing that I was forced to reflect upon was this: The message of the Church is seen as largely irrelevant to many people today, including the homeless young people I work with. Yet the message of Jesus was not irrelevant in his time. Thousands of people followed him to listen to him, they sometimes spent the whole day listening to him, even forgot that they were hungry; he went into towns and, we are told, the whole town turned out to listen to him; the poor man who was paralysed and wanted to be cured couldn't get near Jesus because of the

crowds and had to go up on to the roof and be lowered down. And these were ordinary, poor people. The rich lived in the cities, and there is no record of Jesus ever going into the cities to preach – except once, he went to Jerusalem, and we know what happened to him there! The poor lived in the towns and villages and it was to them that Jesus preached. And what they heard was clearly understood by them to be Good News. Now, if the Church's message is supposed to be the continuation of the message of Jesus, why does it seem today to be so irrelevant. Has the message changed? I think, in some ways, it has. As it says in your own Constitutions: "Aware that it is easier to adapt to one's surroundings than to remain faithful to the Gospels..." I think that maybe the Church in Europe has adapted to the culture around it, rather than challenging that culture. But these are questions that I will return to.

Secondly, the programme. I'll talk twice a day and suggest themes or scripture passages for reflection and meditation. Since these talks had to be translated into French, I have had to write them down in advance, so they will be available by email if you want them. I'm assuming, fairly arrogantly, that you might actually want them! I doubt if I will say much that will be new to you; what I say will probably be already familiar to you from your own experiences. However, maybe hearing it anew might be helpful in reinforcing your own convictions, or maybe, something I say might be a catalyst for your own further reflections, or maybe again, if like most of us, you have been too busy to try and put a structure on your own reflections, maybe these talks might be a help in doing that. However, what I say is far less important than what the Holy Spirit might say. So your own reflections and prayer is at the centre of this week. A retreat is a time to be surprised – Gerry Hughes is an English Jesuit whose best known book is "God of surprises". To be open to the unexpected, indeed to expect the unexpected is the predominant disposition for beginning a retreat.

While the Spirit blows where and when the Spirit wills, the times of prayer, and the quiet times between prayer, are privileged moments for the Spirit to be at work. Because at those times, we are most receptive to the Spirit.

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Then Elijah was told, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before Yahweh.' For at that moment Yahweh was going by. A mighty hurricane split the mountains and shattered the rocks before Yahweh. But Yahweh was not in the hurricane. And after the hurricane, an earthquake. But Yahweh was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, fire. But Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire, a light murmuring sound.

And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice came to him, which said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' (I Kings 19 v 11-13).

As I have said, my talks are the least important part of the retreat – maybe the fire or the hurricane or the earthquake. The Spirit speaks gently to us in the depths of our hearts. At worst, what I say is irrelevant; at best it is only the catalyst, the jumping off point for your own reflections and prayer. I am not a theologian, nor a scripture scholar, I am simply going to share with you my own faith and my own reflections on scripture and theology in the light of my experience. I don't pretend that I have the truth; no-one has the truth, because God is bigger than any of us can comprehend. So the theme of the week could be entitled "Towards a Spirituality of Justice". But as Gerry Hughes would say, "there is no such thing as a spirituality of justice, there is only a spirituality of the Gospels in which justice is an integral dimension". And I agree. So my reflections will be firmly based on the Gospels, as understood in the light of my own experience.

You might disagree with some of my theology – indeed I hope you do, for that is the way we move forward. What is theology anyway? Theology is our attempt to understand what is unintelligible to us, as will become clearer during the week.

### **The Night Sky**

Imagine two little children looking up at the stars on a very dark, clear night. One child says: "I bet you those stars are five miles away."

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The other says: “No, they're not – they're ten miles away.”

The first child says: “Don't be stupid. If they were ten miles away you wouldn't be able to see them.”

And the two children end up fighting over whether the stars are five miles or ten miles away.

We disagree and fight over our understandings of God. These two children are trying to express a truth, on which they both agree, namely that the stars are a very, very long way away. The concepts they use, five miles or ten miles are concepts which express, for them, the fact that the stars are a very long way away. But five miles or ten miles are hopelessly inadequate concepts to express how far away the stars really are. But they are the only concepts the children have and *to them* they are expressing the truth. The child who says that the stars are ten miles away is, of course, more correct than the child who says that they are five miles away! But both are hopelessly wrong as they try to express a reality that is true. But the concept that *would* adequately express the reality – “quadrillions of miles” – is beyond their comprehension – and mine.

God is beyond our understanding. But we make the mistake of trying to 'capture' God within our puny little concepts and claiming that *we* know God, while we think that everyone who disagrees with us is wrong. We can never *know* God, we can only *search* for God. This will be a theme running through some of my talks. Searching for God is to acknowledge that we have not found God; that we have not understood God. Once we stop searching, we are in danger of claiming that we have found God, that we now understand God. And then we miss God.

So let us disagree over our theology, in love.

One of the things I have learnt from young homeless people is that we cannot understand the Gospels unless we know who we are and where we come from.

When we read the Gospels, we filter them through several different lenses:

- One lens is the attitudes which have been handed down to us from tradition, culture, family, society, Church and shaped by our own experiences. For example, if I have

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been the victim of serious crime, that may shape my attitude towards criminals, whereas if I work with people in trouble with the law, I may have a very different understanding of crime and a very different attitude towards criminals. These attitudes are so much a part of ourselves that we do not usually question them – they appear to be self-evident, obvious, common-sense. If we encounter someone with very different attitudes, instead of allowing them to challenge our attitudes, we can often be very dismissive of them.

- Another lens which filters our understanding of the Gospels is our *attachments*. We are all attached to different things, some are attached to a particular model of car, a house, a person, whatever. Those attachments are our securities and we fear losing them. Attachments bring *fears*. Nothing filters our understanding of the gospels as much as our fears. Like the overweight woman who stepped on to the weighing scales. Her weight was appropriate for a person two feet taller than she was. Indignantly, she declared that the scales weren't working properly. We do that with the Gospels all the time. If we are financially very comfortable, we may have difficulty reading the verse:

“None of you can be my disciple without giving up all that he owns” (Luke 14 v 33).

Of course, you will argue, Jesus didn't mean you had to give up all your possessions, no, we have to study the scriptures, and read the scripture scholars, to understand what exactly he meant by that! The fact that Jesus may have meant exactly what he said is so frightening, so threatening that we refuse to entertain the idea. However, if you are a homeless person living on the street, the idea that the disciples of Jesus have to give up all their possessions might sound like a great idea – there may now be enough to go around and maybe they wouldn't be homeless. Fear is the enemy of spirituality. And fear comes from attachments, the fear of losing what we value.

The ideas and concepts which we read or encounter have to integrate with the ideas and concepts which are already in our mind. If they don't fit, we have two choices: either we allow them to challenge the ideas and concepts already in our mind (the difficult choice) or we interpret them in a way that allows them to fit (the easy choice). So to understand the Gospels we have to understand ourselves, our prejudices, our attachments, our fears and the baggage we carry. The greater our self-awareness, the more closely we can understand the revelation of Jesus.

The next point is: don't believe a thing I say, or indeed that anyone else says, no matter how scholarly or erudite they are. I also read the Gospel through the lens of my own experience, and my own attachments and fears, so why should you believe that my understanding of the Gospel is any more authentic than anyone else's. Anything you hear, from me or anyone else, bring to the court of your own experience. You have to own what you believe, not just take it on another person's authority. If you accept what I tell you, because I say it, you are like the tourists on a coach travelling through a beautiful countryside with the curtains closed. The tour guide is describing the beautiful scenery which you are passing through. When you go home, you tell your friends about the beautiful scenery which the tour guide described to you, but they will be bored. No, you have to pull back the curtains and experience what the tour guide is saying to you, you have to see the scenery for yourself if you are to appreciate its beauty. Then, when you go home, you can tell your friends about the beautiful scenery, but you will be saying it with passion, the passion that comes from experience. You must listen to your own experience to understand God.

So, don't believe a word I tell you, or that the Church tells you, unless you test it at the court of your own experience.

The deeper our relationship with God, the better we will understand the Gospels. We encounter God, not in Churches or holy places, but in our own experiences. I will come back to that again and again in these talks. If we examine our own experien-



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ce, there we will find God, and understand God and that is more important than anything else.

So tomorrow morning, to be true to what I am saying, I have to talk about my own experiences and how I came to know God in those experiences. I am going to talk about my own work with homeless young people and how they have radically changed me, and taught me about God. The talks this week form a package, a progression. What I say in the first few talks will lead into what I say in the next few talks and so on. The later talks are built on the earlier talks. But as I said earlier, what I say is relatively unimportant; what the Holy Spirit says to you, in the context of your own experience, is what is important. Be ready to be surprised.

Hence I recommend each day a minimum of two hours prayer and a maximum of eight hours prayer – only joking! If you want to pray for twelve hours each day, that's ok. I will suggest some scripture texts for you to meditate on. I don't know if you are familiar with Ignatian Contemplation, but I will do, with you, an Ignatian Contemplation tomorrow. I find it a very powerful method of prayer, in which we use our imagination. Our imagination is also a gift of God and therefore it is entirely appropriate that we use our imagination to pray.

For reflection, I would suggest the same two questions for each session:

- First, what am I taking away with me from this talk? Is there one thing that I seriously disagree with or is there one thing that I feel I would like to give more thought to?
- Secondly, how am I feeling right now? This is a discernment question. God sometimes calls us along a certain path in one of two ways:
  - a) Either God puts something before us which we find very attractive, something that gives us life and enthusiasm, in order to attract us to travel down that direction.
  - b) Alternatively, God puts something before us which makes us feel very uncomfortable, which we don't want to even consider, which we want to reject out

of hand. In this case, God may be trying to draw us down a path where we do not want to go. The uncomfortableness we feel may come from a resistance on our part to travelling down this path. That resistance may be related to our attachments and fears.

So we need to be in touch with our feelings, feelings of enthusiasm and feelings of uncomfortableness, to discern where those feelings are coming from and what God may be trying to say to us through them.

Finally, each evening I invite whoever may wish to do so to come together to share what has been happening to us and within us during the day. It is an opportunity to share what the Spirit is saying and doing. It is an opportunity to share our insights, our confusions perhaps, our joys and our struggles. It is purely voluntary, of course, with no pressure on anyone to do so.

### **The Annunciation** (Luke 1 v 26-38)

Perhaps a good place to start our prayer this week is with the story of the Annunciation. Mary was living a quiet, normal life when suddenly the God of surprises turned her life upside down. Mary woke up that morning with not even the slightest suspicion that today her life was going to change dramatically. Her first reaction, pretty understandable, was one of confusion, even denial: "How can this be?"

As we begin a retreat, we have no idea what is going to happen during the next few days. We believe that God is with us, the God of surprises. And we try to be open to what God is going to do. That openness is the central disposition we must try to have as we enter into any retreat. If we come with closed mind-sets, a fixed theology, then God will have his work cut out. We come to a retreat with a conviction that, although we have no idea what is going to happen to us and within us, we will be, in some way, a different person at the end of the week. It may be something we recognise as a very significant moment in our lives, or it may be a seed that will grow and germinate in the weeks and

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months to come. God's spirit is at work and all God asks of us is to be open to the Spirit.

Mary was totally surprised at God's intervention. She sought first to understand: "How can this be, I am not married", but it was impossible for her to understand; her understanding of God's intervention that day would only come, slowly, over time and with experience. And so with us: Although we like to have clarity and know exactly what is going on, God's intervention may not be at all clear at the time, and we may have to allow time and experience to help us to appreciate what God is doing this week.

But Mary, confused, not understanding the future implications of what God was asking of her, responded with the response of every disciple of Jesus: "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you have said."<sup>1</sup>

So I would suggest you take that passage from Luke's Gospel, Chapter 1, for reflection and prayer this evening and tomorrow morning and let God continue the work in us that God has already begun. Just read the passage slowly, allowing it to settle in your mind, and just rest with it before God.

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1. *"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, you who enjoy God's favour! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Look! You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. And I tell you this too: your cousin Elizabeth also, in her old age, has conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.' Mary said, 'You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said.' And the angel left her."*

## *Working with Homeless Young People*

I want to begin by talking about my own work with homeless young people. Not that it is of any great importance or significance but because our spirituality does not exist in a vacuum – it develops within and through our experiences. And so my work with homeless young people is the context for all that I am going to say during the week. In particular, this morning, I want to share with you how they have totally and radically changed me.

I started working with homeless young people by accident. In 1974, the Jesuits in Ireland were predominantly working in schools and retreat houses and teaching theology and philosophy, mainly to middle-class people, and we were very happy and content to do so. But in the 1970s, the importance of working for justice was growing, mostly influenced by the events and reflections of Latin America, and so the Jesuits in Ireland, not to be left behind, decided to open a small community in the Inner City of Dublin, in a place called Summerhill. The provincial looked for volunteers to be part of this community, and surprise, surprise, got very few! However, I was one of three who volunteered – I was studying theology at the time and this seemed far more interesting! So one weekend the three of us moved into a small apartment in a old tenement building which was divided into eight apartments. Luckily it wasn't raining when we moved in: we had a top floor apartment, and when it rained, the rain just came through the ceiling. The place was crawling with rats and the rats were the size of little kittens and immune from every poison that had ever been invented. As we lay in bed at night, you could hear the rats, all night long, running around the ceiling, fighting with one another, squealing, dragging bits of food, sometimes gnawing through the electric wires and all the lights would go out. Families on the ground floor would talk of waking up in the

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morning and finding a rat on the baby's cot. But worst of all was the soundproofing – there was no soundproofing between flats. We could hear the news on the television in the flat below us and every conversation that took place. But the added problem was that the Inner City complex where we were living was a “dumping ground” for “problem” families, or rather for families with problems. Families with problems, usually alcohol related, were evicted from other areas of the city and re-housed in Summerhill. In our house, the family with problems lived in the flat just below us; a father, (who, when asked what he did for a living, always said that he was an armed robber, which he was), a mother and a small three year old child. Both parents were alcoholics and were out drinking each night into the early hours of the morning. They would return to their apartment about one o'clock in the morning and about three nights a week, they would have an almighty row – shouting and screaming at one another until about three o'clock in the morning when they fell asleep from drink and exhaustion. But everyone else was wide awake and it was difficult to get back to sleep. So it was impossible for most people to keep a job, as they often slept late into the morning, and it was impossible for children to go to school as again, they often arrived in school very late and very tired.

Moving into the Inner City was for me a huge culture shock. The conditions in which people lived were appalling. But what shocked me even more was the fact that I had been living in Dublin for many years, totally unaware of the conditions that people lived in, in this complex which was five minutes walk from the city centre, where everyone else went shopping and partying.

What were we going to do? We did nothing for the first few months except visiting other residents. People were very puzzled at why priests were living in their complex. Some asked: “What did we do wrong, that the bishop sent us here?” But they were delighted to have us and we were welcomed into every house, even those of the most criminally minded!

Anyway, it became very clear that young people were a priority – they were leaving school by the age of 12, hanging around the streets, their parents were unemployed and they

couldn't give them any money, so they were out robbing, and ending up in prison – it was as predictable as day follows night. So we opened a youth club and a craft centre and ran employment schemes and took the kids away for weekends – all the usual stuff you might do with young people in an area like that.

After a while, we became aware of a small number of young people, some as young as 9, who were leaving our youth club late at night and going out to find somewhere to sleep. So we added a small hostel for six young people, up to the age of 16, who were homeless, to the list of services that we were providing. It was never my intention to spend my life working with homeless people. But after a few years, the young people were leaving at the age of 16 and going back on to the streets. So we opened a hostel for the over 16s. Then a hostel for the over 18s. Then the drug problem hit Dublin, so we opened a drug detox centre. Then they were leaving the detox centre and going back on to the streets and back to drugs, so we opened a drug-free after-care house. Then they were leaving the drug free house and going back on to the streets. So we began getting some apartments into which they could move for a further twelve months. So trying to meet one need, revealed another need. We then tried to meet that need, and yet another need became apparent – and so on. So I started working with homeless people by accident and continued working with them by accident.

Who are these homeless young people? They actually span the whole spectrum of homeless people: some have gone on to Third Level Education, others qualified as trades people and became carpenters, electricians, bricklayers. They would tend to be the homeless young people who were least damaged by their childhood experiences. For example, one young man ran his own construction company, employing about twelve people, doing extensions, small building projects and renovations. He became homeless at 15 years of age, when his mother said she was going to England. He told her she could go on her own; he was staying in Dublin, his school was here, his friends were here and he was going nowhere. He wasn't damaged by his childhood experiences, his mother was a loving, caring person and he had a good childhood. But she went to England, and so he had nowhere to

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live. He lived with us for a number of years and then moved on successfully to his own place.

However, many of the young homeless people we work with have had horrific childhoods. I'm thinking of a young man who lived with his mother and sister. He was very attached to his sister. His mother was an alcoholic and a mental health patient. When he was twelve, his mother stabbed his sister to death in front of him. He left home and we don't know where he was for the next five years – living on the street somewhere. When he was 17, he knocked on our door and he will live with us for the rest of his life, for he now has mental health problems.

I'm thinking of a young man who, at 14 years of age, every time he went home, his mother slammed the door in his face and told him he wasn't wanted here. How do you cope with that rejection at 14 years of age. Not surprisingly, at 20 years of age, he was found dead from a drug overdose.

Or another young lad, 12 years of age, living with his mother who was a drug user. Every morning, before he went to school, he had to go into town, buy the heroin his mother needed for the day and help her to inject it. Not surprisingly, by 15, he was injecting heroin and he was homeless.

Or a young lad, 11 years of age, who turned up at my door late at night asking could he stay. I said, no, he had a home to go to. He said he couldn't go home. I asked him why couldn't he go home. He said he just couldn't go home. I talked to him for a while and persuaded him to go home. So I put him in my car and drove him up to his house. "Here you are, in you go", I said to him. "I can't go in," he said. "Why can't you go in?" I asked him. "I just can't go in," he said. I discovered that he was being sent out by his parents into prostitution and he had to come home with a certain amount of money each night, or he got a beating.

Young people with disaster childhoods. Some of them take drugs. They take drugs for a very different reason why other young people might take drugs. Some young people might take drugs out of curiosity, to see what they are like. Others might take drugs out of peer pressure, to want to be one of the group. But these young people take drugs for a different reason: they take drugs to forget. To forget their childhood memories and to

suppress the feelings associated with those memories. And drugs work. One young man, when I suggested he might give up heroin, said: “When I stop taking heroin, I feel the pain too much.” Another young girl put it very prophetically, just before she died of a drug overdose; “Wouldn’t it be wonderful,” she said, “if you could run so fast that your memories couldn’t catch up.”

So what happens when they come off drugs? When they come off drugs, all those memories and feelings come back to the surface, and they come back with a vengeance. And you have to try and cope, if you can. One young man came down to our detox centre, came off drugs and returned to Dublin. He was doing very well – until his grandmother died. He went to the funeral of his grandmother and there in the front row of the mourners was his uncle who had abused him as a child. All those memories and feelings came flooding back; in the middle of the funeral service, he got up from the bench, and ran down the aisle of the Church and out the door. The next day he killed himself.

So what have these homeless young people done for me?

The first thing I have learnt from them is not to judge. We can never judge anyone, for we do not know what has gone on in their childhood, in their hearts and in their feelings. We had one young lad in our hostel, 17 years of age, and a big fellow. Every time you asked him to do something he didn’t want to do, he threw a punch at you. The staff came to me and said: “This fellow is a no-good; we can’t work with him, someone is going to get hurt, you will have to throw him out of the hostel.” So I said, “ok,” but before I threw him out, I was talking to him on his own one day and he broke down crying. “In my home,” he said, “it was do this, do that, or thump, thump, thump, you got a beating.” As soon as he said that, everything fell into place – when you asked him to do something he didn’t want to do, who did he see in front of him: his father. And he reacted the only way he knew how to react: he threw the first punch before his father could get a punch in. Once we knew that, we were able to work with him and he lived with us for several years, before moving on successfully to his own accommodation. This was a young person that we could have written off, because we didn’t know what had happened to him in his childhood.



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There is a phrase in the gospel: “Do not judge and you will not be judged.” I always thought that that meant: “if you go through life not judging people, then when you go before God, God won’t judge you.” But now I don’t think that is what it means. What am I doing if I judge someone – I am judging *myself*. I know that if I had been born into their family, I would be no different to them; and if they had been born into my family, they would be the priest coming up to visit me in prison. I didn’t choose the family I wanted to be born into, they didn’t choose the family they wanted to be born into – it could so easily have been the other way around. And so when I look at them and maybe they are out robbing or stoned on drugs, I see part of myself in them. As the cliché goes, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”

And if we are asked not to judge, it is because I believe God does not judge us. God forgives us. God’s forgiveness is greater than our sinfulness. I grew up believing that God is a judge – God is looking down at us and noting everything we do. You had to be very careful to do everything you were supposed to do, and to avoid doing everything you shouldn’t do, because God was eventually going to judge us. You may, like me, remember the Redemptorists who came around on the parish mission every few years, thumping the pulpit and shouting: “You are all going to Hell, unless you repent.” Mind you, the Jesuits were just as good at thumping the pulpit, but we will skip that bit. I no longer believe in such a God.

Imagine John, a young boy of 12, who has been abused by his father all his life. I ask myself: “How does God see this young man?” God, our God of compassion, must have a special place in God’s heart for him, for all that he has suffered as an innocent child.

Then I imagine Joe, a 22 year old who is out robbing to feed his drug habit. He is breaking into peoples’ homes, robbing their valuables; sometimes, an old person, lying in bed at night, hears the window downstairs breaking and is frightened to death. They might feel so insecure in their own home, that they cannot bring themselves to return to live there. I ask myself: “How does God see Joe?” I imagine that God must want justice for the victims of Joe’s crimes.

My problem is: Suppose John and Joe are the same person! And Joe is robbing to feed a drug habit because the only way he can cope with the experience of sexual abuse as a child is to take drugs. John and Joe are separated in our time by 10 years but to God, they are simultaneously present in eternity. How does God reconcile being compassionate to John and wanting justice for Joe's victims? The only way I can reconcile the two is to say that the fulfilment of God's justice is forgiveness. When we break the relationship with God through sin, how does God restore that relationship? Not by punishing us, not by getting his own back on us, not by teaching us a lesson, but by forgiving us.

A mother once came to me and said: "Father, I don't know what to do. My son is a drug user. He has often come into the house demanding money for drugs, and if I didn't have it to give him, he would smash all the windows in the room. Sometimes he has even beaten me, because I didn't have the money for his drugs. I don't know what to do." "Where is he now?" I asked. "He's in jail, Father, the first peace I have had in five years." "And do you ever go to visit him?" I asked. "Ah, Father, I go up to see him every Saturday afternoon without fail, sure isn't he still my son." And to me, that was an image of the forgiving God. He hadn't even said sorry, but she could still say: "Sure isn't he still my son."

There was a man in Northern Ireland, Gordon Wilson was his name. His daughter was killed in an IRA bomb in Enniskillen. A few days later, he went on television and said: "I forgive those who did this to me and my family." And he spent the rest of his life working for peace and reconciliation in Ireland. Forgiving them did not bring his daughter back, it did not heal the hurt that he felt for the rest of his life. They had inflicted the greatest pain and injustice on him, they had not asked for forgiveness – indeed they would probably have done the same the next day again, if they could have got away with it – yet he was still able to say: "I forgive them." Now if he whom God created could forgive those who had done this to him, then surely the God who created him will forgive us even more.

God forgives us whatever we may do; there is no judgement. This is not traditional theology and of course you may well

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disagree, but, as I said, I am only sharing with you what I now believe. I will come back to this again.

I would like to share with you a little poem that I read and loved:

### **Heaven**

I was shocked, confused, bewildered,  
As I entered heaven's door,  
Not by the beauty of it all,  
Nor the lights or its décor.

But it was the folks in Heaven  
Who made me sputter and gasp,  
The thieves, the liars, the sinners,  
The alcoholics and the trash.

There stood the kid from the seventh grade  
Who swiped my lunch money twice,  
Next to him was my old neighbour  
Who never said anything nice.

Herb, who I always thought  
Was rotting away in hell,  
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine,  
Looking incredibly well.

I nudged Jesus, "What's the deal?  
I would love to hear your take.  
How'd all these sinners get up here?  
God must have made a mistake.

And why's everyone so quiet,  
So sombre – give me a clue"  
"Hush, child," He said, "they're all in shock,  
No-one thought they'd be seeing you!"

If God is not a judge, then who is God. The second thing I have learnt from these young homeless people is to be exceedingly grateful to God for what I have received. I grew up in a loving home, my parents gave me the best education they could get, supported me in so many ways and who, above all, protected me from many of the dangers from which these children would have loved to have been protected from, but weren't. And growing up, I took all that for granted, until I started hearing these young peoples' stories, and then I realized just how very lucky I had been. So they have changed my understanding of God. And they have changed my relationship with God – my prayer now, each day, is just a prayer of thanks – there is nothing else to say. God, for me now, is no longer the one who judges me, God is the Giver of the Gifts and I am the Receiver of the Gifts. And I have received gifts in abundance and with those gifts came the ultimate gift, the infinite and unconditional love of God.

And there is one more gift which I have received from these young people. *They have made me angry.* The neglect which they have experienced from our society and from its decision-makers has opened my eyes to what is happening in our society. I was blind, blinded by the experience of family which I enjoyed, by the privileged existence where I lived and wanted for nothing, by an educational system which opened opportunities for me, by a job market which could give me a very comfortable quality of life in our society. I filtered my understanding of my society through this socio-cultural lens, so that my comfort zone would not be challenged. I knew I was privileged and, yes, I knew that others did not have the home or the education or the job possibilities that I enjoyed. But little did I realise how successfully and willingly our society pushed them to the margins and ensured that they remained there. Many of these young people were trying to climb out of a hole that they were in, a hole that was not of their making. And the support and help which they needed, and which they could reasonably have expected, was simply not given to them. And then we blame them for not climbing out of the hole! In Ireland, we have an estimated 15,000 heroin users; how many

## *Working with Homeless Young People*

detox beds have we in the whole country for 15,000 heroin users? 28. And that is a scandal. The Christmas before last, I buried two young people who had died of an overdose; both were well known to me – one was found dead on Christmas morning. And they were both on the waiting list for one of those detox beds – but they didn't have time to wait. And that makes me angry.

There is no need for people to be homeless in our affluent Western world. They are homeless because we do not provide the resources which would enable them to pay for a small apartment they could call home, or the resources to provide them with social housing and the support services they may need to deal with their own personal issues.

Love and anger are two sides of the same coin. You cannot love someone who is suffering unnecessarily without being angry at what is causing that suffering to them. I have learnt to be angry and I always say that when I lose my anger, I will no longer be any use to these homeless young people. To work for social justice, you must be angry, a passionate but controlled anger.

And finally, they have taught me what is the hardest part of being homeless. Is it having to find a doorway or derelict building in which to sleep? No, you get used to that, it's not comfortable, but you get used to it. Is it being hungry or cold during the day or night? No, you get used to that as well. Is it being bored all day long with nothing to do? No, you get used to that as well. A young lad lived with us for a few years. When he was about 18, he left us to go and live with his girlfriend. After about a year, the relationship ended and he left. He went on to the streets as he had nowhere else to go. After a few months on the streets, he threw himself into the Liffey, the river that flows through Dublin. To his dismay, he was rescued and brought to hospital. The following day I visited him in hospital and he said to me: "Peter," he said, "I can't go on living like this." "Living like what?" I asked him. "I can't go on living," he said, "knowing that nobody cares." The hardest part of being homeless is to know that if you disappeared off the face of the earth, no-one would even notice, never mind care. You live, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, knowing that your life has no value, no importance, no

significance to anyone else. You have become no-body, you have lost your dignity, any sense of your own value.

And so, in our hostels for homeless young people, what are we doing? If all we are doing is giving people a bed for the night, and food and clothes, then we may as well pack up and go home. What we are really trying to do is to give these young people a message – the message that they are just as good, just as important, just as valuable as any other young person of their age. And if we are not giving them that message, then we may as well pack up and go home, because the rest isn't worth it.

One of the questions which homeless people sometimes ask me is: "Why do you bother with the likes of us?" You can hear in that question the total loss of self-esteem. It reminds me of another question, a question that was asked of Jesus by the Pharisees: "Why do you bother with the likes of them?" – them, being the tax collectors and sinners. And the answer is the same: "Because you're worth it."

You could summarize the whole revelation of Jesus in the sentence: Jesus came to tell us that God is our parent, and therefore that every human being is a child of God, and has the dignity of being a child of God. The dignity of every human being is at the very centre of the revelation of Jesus. The link, then, between faith and justice is the *dignity* of people.

Sometimes people ask me, why am I, as a priest, running hostels and drug treatment centres for homeless people. Why don't I leave that to the social workers, and do what a priest is supposed to do. I would argue that to give people back their dignity as children of God, and to challenge the wider society to acknowledge that dignity, is precisely what a priest, as a minister of the Gospel, is called to do. If I get up into the pulpit to proclaim the dignity of every human being with my words, unless I seek, by my actions, to make that dignity a *reality* in the life of every human being, then my words have no meaning. Faith without justice is hypocrisy – it is empty words that mean nothing because we have taken the meaning out of them. Justice seeks to put that meaning back into the words, to make reality reflect what we say, and what we say to reflect reality.

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Finally, I am sometimes asked: do I ever talk to these homeless people about God. I say, “No. I can’t talk to them about God. Because when I use the word ‘God’, I mean a being who loves them with an infinite and unconditional love; but when they hear the word ‘God’, they hear ‘judgement, condemnation.’” So we are using the same word in two totally contradictory meanings.

One young man once said to me: “The very thought that there might be a God depresses me.” Now I am used to young people telling me that they do not believe in God. But this was going one step further. As I reflected on it, I came to understand what he meant. He felt so bad about himself, he felt he was no good, he felt he was unlovable. Where did he get that idea from? Why, from everyone around him. His family threw him out, didn't want him; his school expelled him; the police hassle him, telling him to move on, they don't want him around. Even the Church is telling him he's bad! The Church says, “If you rob, that's bad.” And he says to himself “Well, I rob, so I must be bad.” The Church says, “If you take drugs, that's bad.” And he says to himself, “Well, I take drugs, so I must be bad.” (Which raises a question about the Church's message!). So everyone is telling him, he's bad, he's not wanted. So he says to himself, “Well, if there is a God up there, God is looking down on me and saying, 'There's someone I couldn't love,' because he believed that that was the truth about himself. So he says to himself: “It's bad enough going through life thinking you are no good, but to have to go through eternity thinking you are no good – that's too much!” So for him, the Good News is that there is no God, no afterlife. I came to realise that you cannot believe in a God who loves you, if you do not love yourself.

So, I cannot talk to them about God, a God who loves them. But I say, “I hope we are *communicating* God to them”. How do you communicate to them a God who loves them? Why, by loving them, not by talking about it.”

So again, I just remind you of the two questions which I tentatively propose to you to focus your reflection:

- 1) What are you taking away with you from this talk? Is there anything I have said that you disagree with, but before throwing it out and calling me an idiot, you feel that you

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might want to reflect on it a little further. Or something which strikes you as interesting, maybe something you haven't thought much about before and you would like to give it some attention.

- 2) Has anything I said left you experiencing feelings of enthusiasm or feelings of uncomfortableness, and where do those feelings come from?

Finally, I suggest the following passage from the Gospels for your prayer. But feel free to ignore my suggestions if there is a passage that you yourself feel more inclined to pray about.

It is the woman taken in adultery, in John's Gospel, Chapter 8. Again, just to remain before God with the passage, allowing it to sink deeper and deeper into my consciousness.

*At daybreak he appeared in the Temple again; and as all the people came to him, he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in the middle, they said to Jesus, 'Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind. What have you got to say?'*

*They asked him this as a test, looking for an accusation to use against him. But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger. As they persisted with their question, he straightened up and said, 'Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to throw a stone at her.' Then he bent down and continued writing on the ground. When they heard this they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest, until the last one had gone and Jesus was left alone with the woman, who remained in the middle. Jesus again straightened up and said, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus. 'Go away, and from this moment sin no more.' (John 8 v 1 - 11)*



## *You are loved*

As I said in the last talk, God for me now is the Giver of the Gifts, the one who loves me with an unconditional and infinite love. I think this must be the foundation stone on which all our work for social justice is built.

There are times I need to be alone, to be away from all this hectic activity, surrounded by people, demands and noise. I imagine myself to be swimming on a lake, a crowded lake, adults and children all competing for a little share of the water. Where can I just be alone for a moment? I have to dive beneath the surface, deep down into the lake, as far as I can go, till I stand on the bottom of the lake, unable to go any further. In those depths, where nothing disturbs the silence and no light or movement can distract you, I am all alone with myself – and my memories. My memories of childhood, family life, adolescence, happy times, even sad times from which you emerge stronger, wiser, more cautious, memories of gifts received and opportunities given – these are my companions in the deep. At these depths, all is experienced as gift. I feel a great sense of gratitude, gratitude for everything that I have received. I have nothing, I am nothing that was not gift. My very being, my family, my health, my intelligence, everything is gift.

Take a deep breath in. Hold it for a second. Then breathe out. Take another deep breath in. Each of those breaths is God's gift of life. If that breath did not come, I am dead. Every few seconds, God gives me this gift of life. And with each breath comes the gift of the infinite love of God, carried, as it were, on the wave of the breath. I receive this gift of life and love tens of thousands of times each day. But I take it for granted and rarely do I acknowledge it.

The gifts that I have been given are gifts given only on loan. Over time, all these gifts have to be given back. Just as we have to give back each breath, it is given on loan only for a few seconds. Our spirituality is a spirituality of letting go because my

## *You are loved*

life, as a human being, is one long letting-go. At birth, I let go of the security of my mother's womb; through childhood and adolescence, I let go of my dependence on my parents; in time, I let go of my parents themselves, as they return to God; in old age, or earlier, I let go of health, perhaps even health of mind – some people say I'm already there! And eventually I let go of the last gift of all, the gift of life itself. These gifts were given freely and now they are asked for back. They belong to the Giver of the Gifts, they were only given on loan.

But at these depths, I am conscious of one other Gift, a Gift that comes with each of the gifts I have received, but yet is independent of them, a Gift that is given, not on loan, but for ever. It is the Gift of being loved, of being loved by the Giver of the Gifts. When all the other gifts have been given back, the Gift of being loved remains.

At these depths, I experience the joy of being loved, loved infinitely and unconditionally, by the Giver of the Gifts.

I am loved *infinitely*: What does love mean? Love means wanting someone's happiness. Every parent wants to give their child all the happiness which they are capable of giving to them. The Giver of the gifts wishes me to have all the happiness which God can give me, infinite happiness. Infinite happiness is my destiny. And so I am loved infinitely.

It is this love that gives me my value. I am like a Picasso painting: A Picasso painting, valued at 50 million euro, where does its value come from? It comes from *outside* itself. Its value is *given* to it. It is valued at 50 million euro because others give it that value, others love it to that extent. But although its value comes from *outside* itself, its value resides *in* the painting itself. If I put an exact, identical copy of the painting beside it, the copy has little or no value. The value is *in* the Picasso painting but the value is given to it from *outside* itself.

And so my value comes from outside myself, from the infinite love which the Giver of the Gifts has for me. But although the value comes from outside myself, the value belongs to *me* – I am of infinite value. Such a notion is counter-cultural in our Western societies today. Our culture seeks to value people by their achievements, by what comes *out* of them. So we look up to

those who have succeeded, and been rewarded financially for their success and we tend to look down on those who have not achieved, the jobless, the disabled; even the elderly are often seen as have-beens. But our faith values people by what has been put into them, the love of God. In the values of the Gospel, the person who is paralysed from the neck down and incapable of even lifting a finger to help themselves has exactly the same value as the person who employs a thousand people. Every single person, the drug user, the criminal, the unemployed, the beggar on the street, all have exactly the same value, because all are loved infinitely by God.

And I am loved *unconditionally*. Nothing can separate me from the love of God. The one thing in this world that never changes is God's love. And so no-one, nothing, not even my own sinfulness, can take away, or diminish by one iota, the value and dignity that God's love bestows on me. Again, this is counter-cultural; society despises and devalues people such as sex offenders; but our faith reminds us that no-one ever forfeits the love of God, or their dignity as a human being, no matter what they do.

Sometimes a homeless person whom I have known maybe for some years will come into my office, sit down in front of me and say: "Can I ask you something? You won't give up on me, will you?" Now, when they ask that question, you know something has gone wrong in their lives. Maybe they have gone back on drugs after being drug free for a while, or maybe they have done something which they know I will seriously disagree with. They hope I will say: "No, no matter what you have done, I will continue to support you. You may have to go to jail, or there may be other consequences and I cannot do anything about that, but through it all, I will continue to support you." Their question is really a question about God, God's unconditional love.

This conviction, that I am loved infinitely and unconditionally, is the foundation stone of our commitment to justice. Because if I am loved infinitely and unconditionally, then *so is everyone else*. If I have this infinite dignity, then *so has everyone else*.

Why do I commit myself to this struggle for justice, which can be difficult, self-sacrificing and problematic?

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Is it for fear of punishment, if I fail to show love? No, as I say I don't believe in judgement or punishment. I don't believe in Hell. The fulfilment of God's justice is forgiveness. The unconditional love of God always forgives us our failings. I can go off to Bermuda, and lie on the beach sipping brandy for the rest of my life and not care about anyone – and I will still be loved infinitely and unconditionally by God and I will still be given a place in the Kingdom of God in Heaven. So why commit myself to this struggle for justice?

Is it for the sake of the reward, a place in the Kingdom of God? No. Because there is no reward. Sorry, guys, but there is going to be no reward for all your hard, self-sacrificing efforts. Why is there no reward? Because we have already received our reward. The moment we were created, we were given the Gift of the infinite and unconditional love of God, and that Gift is ours to keep for ever. There is nothing more that we can ask from God; indeed God has nothing more to give us. There is no other reward, beyond what we already possess. The Kingdom of God is already ours.

But if there is no reward, what happens after death? It would be a foolish person to try and say what happens after death – but I am stupid enough to try! During life, we experience the love of God through the gifts that God gives us; they reveal to us the love of God. But during life, as I say, we give back to God all those gifts until finally we give back the very last gift, the gift of life itself. So at death, all the gifts have now been returned to God; we no longer experience the love of God through the gifts of God; we now experience the love of God directly, face to face. But this is not a new gift, a new reward; it is a new *experience* of the gift we already received long ago, at the moment we were created.

So why do I seek to do the will of God, which can be difficult, if it is not to gain some reward or avoid some punishment?

Tony de Mello, the famous Indian Jesuit mystic, tells the story:

Suppose God came down amongst us and said: "Folk, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I exist; here I am, you need doubt no longer. The bad news is that there is no

afterlife. How would you react?” Would you go straight to the Provincial and say: “I’ve made a terrible mistake. Give me my share of the inheritance and I’m out of here”. Tony would say: “If you are working for God for the sake of a reward, you are a mercenary”. No he hopes you would say: “Well, God, I’m sorry to hear that; I would love to live with you for all eternity; but if that is what you want, well, so be it. I will continue doing what I am doing, only out of love for you.”

The only motivation for a Christian, then, is *gratitude*, gratitude for the gifts which I have received, and for the Gift which comes with the gifts, the infinite and unconditional love given by the Giver of the Gifts. The deeper my appreciation of that love, the deeper my gratitude and the more I am committed to reaching out to God’s children on the margins. To work for social justice, you have to be a contemplative. And the more I reach out to God’s children on the margins, the closer they lead me to contemplation of the Giver of the Gifts. So the foundation stone for justice is my experience of, and gratitude for, the love of God.

Perhaps one passage for our prayer this evening would be the transfiguration, in Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 17.

*“Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured: his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as dazzling as light. And suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them; they were talking with him. Then Peter spoke to Jesus. ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘it is wonderful for us to be here; if you want me to, I will make three shelters here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ He was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud covered them with shadow, and suddenly from the cloud there came a voice which said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him.’ When they heard this, the disciples fell on their faces, overcome with fear. But Jesus came up and touched them, saying, ‘Stand up, do not be afraid.’ And when they raised their eyes they saw no one but Jesus.” (Matt 17 v 1-8)*

## *You are loved*

A long tradition in spirituality identified the search for union with God as being found in contemplative prayer. In that tradition, it was understood that we can only unite ourselves with God through uniting our *spirit* with God, who is Spirit. This means leaving behind this material, messy, chaotic world and climbing the mountain, with Peter, James and John, in search of God. There, at the top of the mountain, far distant from the cares of this world, in those highest forms of contemplative prayer, we enter into an intimate relationship with God. Like Peter, James and John, we wish to remain there and enjoy the intimacy. In that intimacy, traditional spirituality understood that there we find union with God.

However, St. Ignatius had a different understanding of how we find union with God. Yes, he would say, climb the mountain; yes, enter into that intimate relationship with God at the highest levels of contemplative prayer; yes, experience the joy of that intimacy. But you have not yet found union with God. To find union with God, you must, like Peter, James and John, go back down the mountain, return to this material, messy, violent world, and there you will find union with God, through *union of your will with God's will*. It is in our work for justice, as I will develop in the next few days, that we find union with God.

So as I leave, for a time, the children of God swimming on the surface of the lake, to be alone at the bottom of the lake with myself, my memories and my God, I feel the desire to return to the surface, and there, in gratitude, seek the will of God. But we must, again and again, dive deep down to the bottom of the lake or climb to the top of the mountain of Tabor, to be alone with God and renew our strength to continue the struggle for a more just world.

We have a mountain in the West of Ireland, called Croagh Patrick. Each year, many pilgrims come to climb the mountain. It's about a two hour climb to get to the top, and at the top there is a little chapel. One man recently climbed the mountain every day for 365 days. Perhaps that is an image of what we are called to do. To climb Mount Tabor again and again, but always returning back down to the bottom of the mountain.

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Perhaps another scripture passage for our contemplation might be the Magnificat in Luke's Gospel, chapter 1:

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
And my spirit exults in God my Saviour,  
Because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid.  
Yes, from this day forward  
all generations will call me blessed,  
For the Almighty has done great things for me.  
Holy is his name  
And his mercy reaches from age to age  
for those who fear him.*

*He has shown the power of his arm,  
He has routed the proud of heart,  
He has pulled down princes from their thrones  
and exalted the lowly.  
The hungry he has filled with good things,  
the rich sent empty away.  
He has come to the help of Israel, his servant,  
mindful of his mercy  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors –  
of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.  
(Luke 1 v 46-55)*

So the first half of the Magnificat speaks to me of Mary's total conviction, borne from her own experience, of the love of God for her, freely given, not deserved, and given in all the abundance which God is able to give. Everything she has received is gift. Mary is rooted in that deep appreciation of the dignity and value which she has been given by the love of God. She expresses her deep gratitude to God for that love. Humility consists not in denying that we are great and wonderful, but in recognising that our greatness is a free gift from God.

In the second half of the Magnificat, Mary recognises that that same love, which has been poured out on her, moves God to reach out, in a special way, to the poor and the powerless. That is the theme for the next few days of our reflection.

## *You are loved*

I would like to finish then with an Ignatian meditation. I am going to describe a scene from the Gospels and I want you to use your imagination, to imagine that you are part of the scene, to be a participant in the events of the story as they unfold. I will be asking you to imagine what you see and what you hear, and most importantly of all, how you are feeling. When I am finished, I will just get up and leave and you can remain in the scene for as long as you might wish.

So sit upright, but in a relaxed position... Eyes closed... Breathe deeply and concentrate for a moment on the breath going in and out of your nostrils... now, imagine you are standing in a field... look around you, what sort of field is it... is it a big field or a small field... Are there any trees in your field... is the grass long, or short... is there a fence surrounding the field or perhaps a hedge... listen to the birds chirping... look beyond the field, what do you see?... is there perhaps a lake beyond the field, or just other fields...

Notice that there are a lot of people in the field, sitting on the grass, perhaps in little groups... listen to the sound of talking... look at the people sitting there... Are you standing or sitting?... are you in the middle of the crowd or at the edge?... More people are arriving... watch them as they come into the field and make their way towards the crowd...

Then a quiet descends on the crowd... listen to the sound of talking getting quieter... notice everyone looking up towards the top of the field... you notice a man coming into the field... he is walking towards the crowd... everyone is looking at him... he stops at the front of the crowd... Someone whispers that his name is Jesus... Everyone is now totally quiet... Observe the man, what does he look like... is he tall, or small... has he a beard or is he clean-shaven... observe what he is wearing... what colour are his clothes... what is he wearing on his feet... just watch for a few moments.



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Now notice Jesus looking down at the crowd... he looks around... he is looking over to your left... he seems to be looking at someone... You hear him calling a name, Peter... notice the man called Peter getting to his feet... what does he look like, is he tall or small... observe him walking towards Jesus, weaving in between the crowds in front of him... observe him as he reaches the front of the crowd... watch him walking up to Jesus... Jesus holds out his arms and greets him... watch them embracing each other, perhaps kissing each other on the cheek... Then Peter moves to the side of Jesus and sits down...

Observe Jesus, he is looking around again... his eyes seem to be searching for someone... his eyes stop moving... he is looking at someone... listen as he calls out... John... observe John getting to his feet... what does he look like, big or small... watch him as he too makes his way towards Jesus... climbing over the crowd... he reaches the front of the crowd and walks up towards Jesus... watch Jesus holding out his arms and embracing him... watch as they embrace for a moment... then watch as John goes to sit beside Peter.

Observe Jesus again... he is looking around again... he is looking down towards the crowd where you are sitting... he seems to be looking straight at you... you hear him calling a name – your name... perhaps you heard wrong... look at Jesus and you see his eyes still looking at you... he calls your name again... how are you feeling... everyone is looking at you... he calls your name again and says “come here”... no, there is no mistake, he is calling you... you stand up and begin to walk through the crowd... watch your feet as you try to avoid walking on someone in front of you... you weave through the crowd... you come to the front of the crowd... imagine yourself walking up towards Jesus... As you get closer, look into his eyes... they are looking straight at you, into you... what do you see in his eyes, a look of love... you are walking up to him... notice his arms going out to greet you... you are now just in front of him... Jesus embraces you... feel his arms going around you... feel the pressure of his hands on your back... you put your hands around Jesus... feel the pressure of your hands on his back...

## *You are loved*

just stand there for a few moments, locked in an embrace of love... get in touch with your feelings at this moment... you and Jesus together, away from the crowd... what is Jesus saying to you... spend a few moments listening to what Jesus is saying to you... what do you want to say to Jesus... stay there as long as you want to.

## *God is Compassion*

We begin by recalling that God is with us today. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." I think forty-two or forty-three would be covered by his promise, as well! So we move on to day two, in the presence of God, open to the God of surprises.

Yesterday, I talked about the foundations on which to build our work for justice. That work is often difficult; standing up for human rights, for those who are poor and on the margins can bring opposition, even persecution; we can often feel that we are getting nowhere or perhaps even going backwards. Hence we need to build our foundations on rock and not on sand. The rock on which the foundations are built is our unshakeable faith in the infinite and unconditional love of God for me and our experience of that love, an experience which is rooted in our appreciation of the many and wonderful gifts which we have received from God.

But before we move on to ask the question: "What does God want?", we have first to ask another question: "Who is God?" The question "What does God want?" is a dangerous question and has caused much suffering in our world. The Crusades happened because someone decided that this was what God wanted; the Inquisition happened because someone decided that this was what God wanted. Some Muslims believe that if a person blasphemes against the Prophet Mahomet, they should be put to death. What sort of God would want their child to be put to death? At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees brought the woman who had committed adultery to Jesus and told him that their God demanded that she be stoned to death. We do terrible things to people in the name of God. We Catholics used to tell the parents of a child that had died without baptism that their child would never see the face of God and could not be buried in consecrated ground. We caused untold suffering to such parents because we believed that that was what God wanted. People do appalling things, in the name of God, because they do not know God.

## *God is Compassion*

To find out what God wants we must first of all be free. We must let the Spirit lead us to the answer, not our anger or our attachments or our fears. Inner freedom is a rare thing, only to be found in the saints – or at least, some of them! To let the Spirit lead us we have to ask the question: “Who is God?” The answer to the question “What does God want?” has to be tested against the question: “Who is God?” And the question: “Who is God?” will challenge our attachments and fears because those attachments and fears lead us to create God in our own image and so distort the answer to the question: “What does God want?” The only thing that can free us from our fears and insecurities is the security of knowing the God of infinite and unconditional love.

So today, we look at the question: “Who is God?” And to find the definitive answer, we look to the revelation of Jesus.

I believe that Jesus came to tell us only one thing: Who God is. Nothing about the past or the future, nothing about Heaven or Hell or who goes there, Jesus came only to tell us who God is. And that is Jesus’ charism: he came from God, he knew God intimately, he was God.

I want to share with you three images which describe the God in whom I believe. These images have been shaped by the work that I do. Then I will ask, “Are those images reflected in the Gospels?” I believe they are.

Since the Gospels talk of God as our Parent, all my images of God are images of parents.

1. My first image of God is of parents watching their home burning down. I ask the question: “What are the parents thinking about?” There could be many things they are thinking about – Do they have enough insurance on the house, What about the poor dog inside. However, if their child is trapped on the top floor of the building and is at the window screaming for help, and I ask the question: “What are the parents thinking about?”, then the answer is obvious. All they are concerned about is the child at the top window. The insurance is obviously very important, and so is the pet dog, but compared to the child at the top window, they fade into insignificance.

And if a stranger should happen to pass by and stop the car and ask “What do you want me to do for you?” the answer is obvious. The parents are not interested in whether the stranger has insurance on his car or not, although that can be very important. They only want him to rescue the child. Rescuing their child becomes the priority beside which everything else becomes irrelevant.

And if the stranger were to ask: “And what will you give me, if I rescue the child?” again the answer is obvious: “We will give you everything we have, there is nothing we would not give you.”

I imagine God, the parent of all, looking down at this world. There are so many things that are important. But everything fades into insignificance for God, alongside the children of God. Like any parent, there is nothing more important than the children.

2. My second image of God is of a parent with two children. One is doing the homework and says to the parent: “Can you help me with the homework?” The parent goes over to help the child with the homework. If at that moment in time, the parent looks out the window and sees their other child being beaten up outside, what do they do? Well, obviously they leave the child doing the homework and go to the rescue of the child being beaten up. Why do they do that? They go to the rescue of their child being beaten up *not* because they love them more than the child doing the homework but because of the *situation* which the child is in. The child who is in danger, or suffering, has a priority call on the parent’s care, concern and time which the other child, at least at that moment in time, does not have to have.

As God looks down on this world, he is looking down at me talking here to you. I had a good night’s sleep last night, I’m going to get well fed during the coming week, I have a job that I love. And I am loved with an infinite and unconditional love – I can’t ask for any more than that, and God can’t give me any more than that. God’s love for me is not in question. But at the same time, God is looking down at some mother in Southern Africa whose children are starving in her arms, or at some

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homeless child on the streets of Dublin or Paris or Calcutta wondering where they are going to get something to eat or where they will sleep tonight, or at some young girl in her apartment wondering if her partner is going to come home drunk and beat her up again tonight, I would have to say that if that God does not have a special care or concern for them in a way that God does not have to have for me, at this point in time, then God would not be our parent. As with any parent, it is those children of God's who are suffering, or who are in danger, who have a priority call on God's care and God's concern.

3. My third image of God is of a man sitting at the side of a lake, enjoying the beautiful day, soaking in the sun, lazing at the lakeside. There is a child paddling beside him in the lake. Suddenly, the child takes a step too far and is in out of its depth. The child is splashing the water and shouting for someone to rescue them. Imagine what the parents of that child would think if the fellow at the side of the lake did *nothing* to try and help the child, and the child were to drown. They would be extremely angry? They would find it almost impossible to forgive him. Nothing that that man could have done to those parents could have been more offensive, more unforgiveable. Even if he had broken into their house in the middle of the night, robbed all their money and jewelry and made off in their car and burnt it out, they might have been able to forgive all that quicker than forgiving him for what he did at the side of the lake. And what did he do at the side of the lake? He did *absolutely nothing*. He broke no law, broke no commandment. Yet his doing absolutely nothing when the child was in danger was the worst possible thing that man could have done to the parents. It would be different if he had fallen asleep and didn't hear the child or if he couldn't swim and was afraid of drowning himself. But if he just couldn't have been bothered to do anything to help the child, that would be what was unforgivable.

Now, I have to ask, are those images reflected in the Gospels? I believe they are.

## The Kingdom of God

To tell us who God is, Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God. A later talk will discuss what did Jesus mean by the 'Kingdom of God'. This is where I believe that the Church's message began to be diluted by the Church's accommodation in the Western world to the society in which it is immersed. But for the moment, we will leave that aside. Whatever Jesus meant by the phrase, it is clear that God's Kingdom is at the centre of Jesus' preaching and ministry.

- At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God is at hand.<sup>2</sup>
- Throughout his ministry, Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God (the Jews avoided using the word 'God', out of respect for the awesomeness and holiness of God, and so Matthew, who was writing to a community of Christians who had converted from Judaism, often substituted the word 'heaven' for God). He often used parables to describe the Kingdom of God: The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the Kingdom of God is like the yeast in the flour, the Kingdom of God is like the seed the farmer sowed in his field. We will look at those parables later: they actually describe your own mission "unknown and even hidden in this world."<sup>3</sup>

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2. "From that time (when Jesus heard that John had been arrested) Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt 4 v 17)

3. "He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." (Matt 13 v 31-33)

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field"... " (Matt 13 v 24)

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- At the end of his ministry, Jesus does not deny the accusation made against him that the Kingdom of God has come in his own person.<sup>4</sup>

The Kingdom of God (Heaven) was a common topic of conversation amongst the Jews. That was, after all, the very foundation stone of the Jewish people – they were chosen to inherit the Kingdom of God. They awaited the coming of the Messiah to lead them into the Kingdom. Before the coming of Jesus there were many false Messiahs who proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom, and no doubt after Jesus there were many false Messiahs proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom. So when Jesus came, saying, “The Kingdom of God is at hand”, I suspect the Jewish people said to themselves: “Here we go again, another one!”

But Jesus said two things about the Kingdom of God – and therefore about who God is– that were new and radical. The first I will talk about now, the second is the topic of the next talk.

### **Entry into the Kingdom of God - compassion**

The first was in answer to the question: “How do I enter the Kingdom of God?” This was a key question, indeed the most fundamental question, for every Jew, as God had offered the Kingdom to them. Jewish theology had its answer: *Entry into the Kingdom of God is through observance of the Law.*

For the Jews, then, observance of the Law was the most important obligation in their life. When the Jewish people were called and chosen by God, God gave them the Law through Moses. God entered into a covenant with them, whereby God promised to be their God, to protect them and to lead them into the Kingdom, *provided* the Jewish people, in turn, observed the Law which God was giving them that day. So observance of the

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4. “Jesus replied, ‘Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews. As it is, my kingdom does not belong here.’ Pilate said, ‘So, then you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘It is you who say that I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.’” (John 18 v 36)



Law in all its details was the primary obligation imposed on every Jew, the proof of their fidelity to God and the gate through which they would enter into that Kingdom which God had promised them. *For Jewish theology, God's passion was the observance of the Law.*

So when Jesus came along, and said that entry into the Kingdom of God was *not* through observance of the Law, the religious authorities were horrified. Jesus was undermining the very foundations of Judaism. Jesus was tearing up the Covenant. If they followed what Jesus was saying, the wrath of God would be visited upon a disobedient people; God might disown the People of God for their unfaithfulness to the Covenant. And if God disowned the People of God, then Israel as a nation would seek to have any meaning. The very existence of the nation was at stake. It seems to me that only one person in the Gospels understood the significance of what Jesus was doing: not Mary, nor the disciples, but Caiphas the High Priest, when he declared:

*"It is better that one man should die than the nation perish."* (John 18 v 14)

So if Jesus declared that entry into the Kingdom of God was *not* through observance of the Law, how did one enter the Kingdom?

For Jesus there was only one gate by which we can enter into the Kingdom of God – and that gate is *compassion*.

I might choose three passages from the Gospels to illustrate:

*1) Last Judgement Scene (Matthew 25 v 31-46)*

First, the Last Judgement Scene. This story is an extremely important story for Matthew. We know that for two reasons:

First, it is the very last story in Matthew's Gospel before the passion narrative. Matthew places this story there to emphasize that this story is the climax of his Gospel, the whole of his Gospel is leading up to this story as its crescendo, its apex.

Secondly, Matthew introduces the story by painting a picture of great solemnity. He does this to alert his listeners to the

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fact that what is coming next is very important. Matthew begins the story with:

*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him.”* (Matt 25 v 31)

And what do we read in Matthew’s story?

*“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”* (Matt 25 v 34 - 36)

The message is clear: entry into the Kingdom of God is through compassion. We will come back to this story in a moment.

### 2) Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16 v 19-22)

The second passage is the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In this story, Jesus tells us about a rich man. Interestingly, he tells us nothing about the rich man’s life, or indeed spiritual life, except that he was rich. He doesn’t tell us whether he was a good Jew or not, whether he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath or not, whether he prayed or not, whether he observed the Law or not. Instead, he just paints a picture of a rich man for his listeners to imagine:

*“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.”* (Luke 16 v 19)

Why does Luke tell us nothing about the rich man’s life, or spiritual life, except that he was rich? Perhaps, because it was irrelevant – *if* he has failed in the one thing that is most important to God, namely compassion. Not that the rich man’s life, or

spiritual life, was irrelevant, full stop. No, but it *becomes* irrelevant if he fails in the one thing that is most important to God, namely compassion.

And in the story, Luke tells us about a poor man. Again, interestingly, he tells us nothing about the poor man, except that he was poor. Again, he paints a picture of poverty for his listeners to image:

*“And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.”* (Luke 16 v 20-21)

In particular, he doesn't bother telling us how he became poor – maybe he drank all his money, maybe he gambled it, or maybe, like the prodigal son, he squandered it on the good life. Why does Luke not tell us how he became poor? Perhaps, again, because it was irrelevant. For Luke, and God, there is no distinction between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor.

The story is about a child of God in need (how he came to be in need is irrelevant) and another child of God who could have reached out and met that need but failed to do so. And for that, there was no place for him in the Kingdom of God.

Again, we will return to this story in a moment.

### *3) The Good Samaritan (Luke 10 v 25-37)*

The third story is the story of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan is a story that is very familiar to us – perhaps too familiar! I don't believe that it is a story just encouraging us to be good neighbours to each other. If that is all the story is about, then any child in 6<sup>th</sup> Class with a good imagination might have thought up this story.

No, the story of the Good Samaritan is far more fundamental than a story about being good neighbours. The story begins with two questions. The most immediate is, of course, the question: *“Who is my neighbour?”*

But there was a prior question. It was asked by a lawyer.

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*"Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

The story of the Good Samaritan is the answer to *that* question.<sup>5</sup>

In the story, Luke describes two people who come across a man lying on the side of the road, robbed and beaten. They both pass by on the other side. Why does Luke pick a priest and a Levite as the two characters to pass by? Were they just the first two role models that came into his head? No, Luke writes his stories very carefully. Luke chose the priest and the Levite precisely because they observed the Law. They considered themselves righteous, and were looked up to by the rest of society, as righteous, because of their observance of the Law. They were considered close to God, friends of God, in God's favour. But for Jesus, there was no place for them in the Kingdom of God because they had failed in compassion.

And the third person, the one who would be welcomed into the Kingdom of God? If we were part of the group listening to Jesus telling the story, we might say to ourselves: "We can understand Jesus picking the priest and the Levite – always a little anti-clerical Jesus was!" But the third person, the one who will make it, who will it be? I know, it will be a good Jewish layperson.

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5. *"Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal lie?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."*

*But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise"."*

And then Jesus comes out with “A Samaritan”. You can hear a gasp from the audience: a Samaritan! The most despised of people by the Jews. And why? Despised precisely because they did not obey the Law, they did not believe in the God who gave the Law through Moses, they were considered to be worshipping a false God. So how could God want anything to do with a Samaritan. They were no friends of God. Yet it was a Samaritan whom Jesus said was going to be welcomed into the Kingdom of God, because of his compassion.

### **Exclusion from the Kingdom of God – Doing nothing**

Just as Jesus announced that entry into the Kingdom of God was through compassion, so he warned us that ignoring the suffering of those around us would exclude us from the Kingdom of God.

I must add here what I said earlier: Jesus is not trying to tell us anything about Heaven or Hell or who goes there. Jesus is trying to tell us who God is. He uses a concept which is central to the Jewish thinking, entry into and exclusion from, the Kingdom of God to communicate who God is. It is like a mother telling her child to be good or Santa won't come. The mother is trying to communicate a truth to her child, namely that the child should be good, and she is using a concept which has meaning for the child, namely Santa Claus, in order to communicate this truth. Obviously the mother is not trying to tell the child anything about Santa Claus, what sort of person he is or anything else.

#### *1) Last Judgement Scene revisited*

And so, in the Last Judgement Scene, Jesus, the Son of Man returned in glory, turns to those on his left and says:

*“You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,*

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*naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” (Matthew 26 v 41-43)*

Now, Jesus in the Gospels is always portrayed as the one who forgives, who makes excuses for people, who never condemns. So what had they done to merit such condemnation from one who never condemns?

The answer was nothing – they had done absolutely nothing. “I was hungry and you did absolutely nothing, I was thirsty and you did absolutely nothing – depart from me you cursed.” Like the fellow at the side of the lake, they had done absolutely nothing. Yet Jesus tells us that this was the most offensive, most sinful, thing they could do, so much so, that they will be excluded from God’s presence.

### *2) Rich Man and Lazarus revisited*

Similarly, in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, I always had a great sympathy for the rich man: after all, it wasn’t his fault that Lazarus lay at his gate. Maybe it was the poor man’s own fault; or maybe it was “the structures”, but it wasn’t the rich man’s fault. But he was excluded from the Kingdom of God, not because he was personally responsible for the plight of Lazarus, but because he did absolutely nothing.

### *3) The Good Samaritan revisited*

And in the Good Samaritan story, if Jesus had stood at the gates of Jericho when the priest and the Levite arrived, and called them over and said to them: “Do you know that you did something so terrible, on that journey, that there can be no place for you in the Kingdom of God?” they wouldn’t have known what Jesus was talking about. They would have scratched their heads and thought: “What did I do wrong? Didn’t rob the parish finances. Didn’t run off with the parish secretary. There was just that dead body by the side of the road.”

And for that, there was no place for them in the Kingdom of God.

In Mark's Gospel, there is a lovely story of a man with a withered hand. Interestingly, the man with the withered hand does not ask Jesus to cure him; he does not attract Jesus' attention in any way. It is Jesus who takes the initiative. He says to the man: "Stand out here in the middle." Now Jesus is going to cure the man; but it is the Sabbath, and it is forbidden to cure on the Sabbath as that is considered to be work. We are told that, after Jesus has cured the man, the Pharisees go away and plot how to get rid of Jesus. Why does Jesus say: "Get up and stand in the middle" and ask for trouble? If I were Jesus, I would have been much smarter; I would have gone up to the man and said: "Around the back afterwards, we won't cause any fuss." And why not, the end result would have been the same, the man would have gone away cured.

What Jesus is about to do is at the centre of the revelation of God that he came to bring: compassion is more important than the Law.<sup>6</sup>

It is the words that Jesus uses that tell us so much about God:

*'Is it permitted on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do evil; to save life, or to kill?'*

Jesus had only two options here: he could cure the man or he could do nothing. So when Jesus says: "*Is it permitted on the Sabbath day to do good*", he means to cure the man; "*or to do evil*", by which he means to do nothing. To do nothing, when faced with a child of God who needs help, is not to do nothing, it is to do evil. "*To save life*", by which Jesus means to cure the man; "*or to destroy it*". To do nothing when faced with a child of God who needs help is to destroy life.

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6. "Another time he went into the synagogue, and there was a man present whose hand was withered. And they were watching him to see if he would cure him on the Sabbath day, hoping for something to charge him with. He said to the man with the withered hand, 'Get up and stand in the middle!' Then he said to them, 'Is it permitted on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do evil; to save life, or to destroy it?' But they said nothing. Then he looked angrily round at them, grieved to find them so obstinate, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and began at once to plot with the Herodian against him, discussing how to destroy him." (Mark 3 v 1-6)

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Hence, since God is the giver of life, and the opposite of God, whom we call Satan, is the destroyer of life, those who, in the Last Judgement Scene, have done nothing have become like Satan and must go to where Satan lives:

*“Depart from me you cursed into everlasting flames prepared for the devil and his angels.”*

### **The Kingdom of God as metaphor**

God’s passion is compassion, not the observance of the Law. Like any parent, God is passionate about the children, with a special concern for those children who are suffering. God is so grateful to us when we reach out to one of God’s children who is suffering, and try and take some of that suffering off their shoulders, that God promises us everything that God can give us, namely the Kingdom of God.

*“Anyone who gives even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my disciples shall not lose his reward.”* (Matt 10 v 42)

And God is so pained when we simply ignore the suffering of God’s children that the only image Jesus can find to express to the Jews how deeply pained God is, is the image of exclusion from the Kingdom that has been promised to them.

### **The God of Compassion versus the God of the Law**

It was clear to the Jewish authorities that Jesus was threatening the very basis of their faith. He was undermining the faith of the people in the true God (the God-whose-passion-is-the-observance-of-the-Law) and inventing a different God (the God-whose-passion-is-compassion). He was therefore not only seen as an enemy of the Jewish faith and nation, he was an enemy of the true God, therefore an ally of Satan.

*“Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. All the crowds were amazed and said,*



Peter Mc Verry s.j.

*'Can this be the Son of David?' But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.'*" (Matt 12 v 22-24)

When I was growing up, the Catholic Church was a Church of the Law. You were identified as a good Catholic by your adherence to a variety of laws and regulations: going to Mass on Sunday, not eating meat on Friday, fasting during Lent, not getting a divorce, not using artificial contraceptives and so on. Your fidelity to the Church's laws and rules was the proof of your fidelity to God.

Tony de Mello tells another story. There is a beautiful sunset, and you want someone to see the sunset. So you point your finger towards the sunset and say to him: "Look at the beautiful sunset." Now if he keeps looking at your finger, he misses the sunset! The Law is like your finger – it is pointing us to something, how to live in right relationship with God and with each other. But if we focus on the Law, then we may lose the whole point of the Law.

The image I often use is a child with two sweets. His mother tells him: "You must give one of your sweets to your brother." What is the mother trying to teach the child? That the child should be generous, and the mother uses the example of the two sweets. But if the child focuses on the sweets, then what happens if the child has three sweets! Does he have to cut one in half? And if his brother is overweight, can he righteously keep all the sweets for himself? By focusing on the Law, you end up with a list of rules and regulations, and you may forget the whole purpose of the law, which in this case is that it is good to be generous.

A Church which proposes fidelity to laws is, wittingly or unwittingly, transmitting a particular understanding of God, namely a God-whose-passion-is-observance-of-the-law. The dominant image of God, then, is that of Judge. Our relationship to God is defined by our observance of laws – if we do as we are supposed to do, then God is pleased with us and will reward us; if we do not do as we are supposed to do, then God will be angry

## God is Compassion

and punish us. Thus, *our relationship with God is controlled by us*, by our behaviour. In this respect, the Church had travelled down the same *cul-de-sac* that religion at the time of Jesus had once travelled. While the emphasis on observance of law, as the criterion for our fidelity to God, has diminished somewhat in recent years, nevertheless it remains the dominant emphasis for many people who have grown up within the Church. It is not the Church's role to tell people *how* to love God; it is the Church's role to tell people how much God loves them, and then to trust them to respond to that love of God. This is what every child does – a child does not have to be told *how* to love their parents. The child spontaneously knows how to respond to the experience of their parents' love.

Jesus sought to teach people a different image of God, God not as Judge, but God as Compassion – a God whose love for us is unchanging, whose forgiveness is greater than all our sinfulness, whose passion is compassion.

The famous story of the prodigal son is the story of two Gods, a God of the Law and a God of compassion.<sup>7</sup>

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7. "Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His

The younger son, who knows he is a sinner, is entirely dependent on the father being a father of compassion. He returns to throw himself on the father's compassion. If the father were to be predictable, and therefore fair, he ought to punish his younger son for his ingratitude, and reward his elder son for his faithfulness.

The elder brother does not want his father to be *compassion*, he wants him to be *fair*. But to his dismay, the father is totally unfair and treats the sinner even better than he treated the just brother! The just brother resents his father's compassion.

The elder brother is in all of us who are doing our best to live good lives according to our understanding of the will of God. Compared to those who are leading selfish and self-centred lives, we may tend to believe God owes us something. If God does not express disapproval of, or punish in some fashion, those whose lives are sinful, then what is the point in the rest of us trying to live good lives with all the sacrifices and effort which that requires? If sinners are going to get the same (or even better!) welcome from God, why should we bother? So thought the elder brother, and all of us who have the elder brother inside us.

Only those who know they are sinners can truly welcome a God-whose-passion-is-compassion. The God-whose-passion-is-observance-of-the-Law offers only condemnation to sinners. Sinners cannot rely on their good works to save them, for they have none; they depend on God's compassion. To them, the God that Jesus revealed was, indeed, good news, for it opened the Kingdom of God to them. That Kingdom had been firmly closed to them by the God who rewards the good and punishes the wicked, the God-whose-passion-is-observance-of-the-Law.

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*father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'*" (Luke 15 v 11 -32)

## *God is Compassion*

Hence, Jesus was welcomed enthusiastically by many who were poor and by many tax collectors and sinners, but rejected by many who were righteous. For them, the God that Jesus revealed was unfair. And God is unfair, because forgiveness and mercy is unfair. The God that Jesus revealed was good news to the poor, but bad news for the righteous, who instead of getting some reward from God for their efforts, saw sinners getting the same treatment from God as themselves.

So, again the same questions for reflection:

- 1) What am I taking away with me from this talk?
- 2) Is there anything in this talk, or in my prayer, which gives me feelings of enthusiasm or uncomfortableness?

And perhaps for our prayer this morning we might take one of those passages; the Last Judgement Scene in Matthew Chapter 25, the Rich Man and the Poor Man in Luke, Chapter 16, the Good Samaritan in Luke, Chapter 10 or the Prodigal Son in Luke, Chapter 15. In those passages we allow ourselves to be present before the God who is compassion.

## *Jesus and the Outcasts*

In the last talk, I said that Jesus came to tell us who God is. And the God that Jesus revealed is a God of compassion. And because God is compassion, entry into the Kingdom of God is through, and only through, our compassion.

But maybe Jesus *didn't* come to tell us who God is. Maybe Jesus *couldn't* tell us who God is. Not because Jesus didn't know who God is – he is the Son of God – but because *we* can never know who God is. What do I mean? If I say that God is compassion, the word 'compassion' may remind me of Mother Teresa, whose extraordinary compassion is surely a witness to the compassion of God. But God's compassion is so infinitely greater than Mother Teresa's compassion, that the concept 'compassion' does not even begin to describe God's compassion. Like the two children looking up at the stars on a clear night, they simply do not have a concept to describe how far away are the stars.

We talk about God's forgiveness. People ask me, when I tell them I do not believe in judgement, but only in the forgiveness of God, “Well, what about Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot? Surely they cannot be forgiven for the awful crimes that they have committed?” But in asking the question, they are reducing God's forgiveness to *our* concept of forgiveness. Of course, we find it very difficult to forgive someone like Hitler, but let us not bring God down to our level! God's forgiveness is infinitely greater than our ability to forgive.

So we cannot say that God is compassion – except to say that the concept 'compassion' gives us a very small glimpse of who God is. As I said in an earlier talk, let us not try to 'capture' God in any of our human concepts, even concepts such as compassion and love and forgiveness, because God is infinitely greater than our little human concepts.

So if Jesus did not come to tell us who God is, because we cannot understand who God is, then perhaps Jesus came to tell us *where to find God*.

## *Jesus and the Outcasts*

Let us look again at the passages from scripture that I used in the last talk. Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God. What do we mean by the Kingdom of God? I'll spend a whole talk on that tomorrow, but for the moment, let us just say that the Kingdom of God is where God lives, where you find God. In the Last Judgment Scene in Matthew 25, we usually understand that passage as meaning: 'If you are compassionate to those in need, then at some time *in the future*, perhaps at the moment of death, you will enter into the Kingdom of God and there find God.' But when Jesus said: "Enter into the Kingdom of God prepared for you", perhaps Jesus meant that in the very act of feeding the hungry, in reaching out in compassion to those in need, in that very act, you found God and therefore you entered into the presence of God, into the Kingdom of God. And to those on the left, perhaps Jesus was not saying that because you failed to reach out in compassion, then at some time *in the future*, perhaps at the moment of death, you will be excluded from the Kingdom of God. No perhaps Jesus was not passing a *judgement*, but stating a *fact*, namely that in failing to reach out to the needs of others, you simply missed God. God was to be found there but you passed by on the other side and so you failed to encounter God and missed the opportunity to enter into the presence of God, you excluded yourself at that moment from the Kingdom of God.

For the religious authorities of that time, this was just outrageous. For them, God was to be found, and could only be found, in the Temple in Jerusalem. Now Jesus was telling them that God cannot be found in the Temple in Jerusalem, unless we first find God in the poor, the suffering and the needy. I will come back to the Temple later. God in the Temple does not disturb us; God in the needy is very disturbing. Perhaps we too, as followers of Jesus, have returned God safely to our Church tabernacles, where God does not disturb us. Jesus reminds us that we cannot find God in our Churches and holy places unless we first find God in the poor.

So to the first question: "How do I enter the Kingdom of God?" Jesus said that entry into the Kingdom is not through observance of the Law, but through compassion. This angered and disturbed the religious authorities. But it was to get worse,

much, much worse. The second question about the Kingdom of God that Jesus answered in a new and radical way was one that was even harder for them to take. The question was: “Who shall be in the Kingdom of God?”

Again, Jewish theology had an answer. If entry into the Kingdom of God was through observance of the Law, then those who observed the Law would obviously be in the Kingdom; and the better you observed the Law, then the higher your place would be in the Kingdom.

Now, who observed the Law? The Law was so complex by the time of Jesus, it consisted of thousands of detailed rules and regulations governing everyday life – before eating, you had to wash your hands up as far as the elbows; if you went to the market place to buy food, you had to sprinkle yourself with water on your return to make yourself clean, you could walk 4.9 km on a Sunday and you were ok, but if you walked 5 km, then you had broken the Law; the definition of work, forbidden on the Sabbath, was defined in the minutest detail.

Some of these rules are described in the Gospels.<sup>8</sup> Even to-day an ultra-orthodox Jew would not switch on a light switch on the Sabbath, as that would be to work.

So in order to know the Law, you had to study it. And to study the Law, you needed the money and education to do so. So who knew the Law? Why, the Pharisees, the scribes, the lawyers, the priests, those who were wealthy and powerful in Israel. The poor didn't know the Law in all its detail, so they were unable to observe the Law in all its detail. Hence the conventional wisdom was that the Pharisees, scribes, lawyers and priests would be there in the highest places in the Kingdom, but the poor, if they got in at all – which was very unlikely! – would be down in the basement. So when Jesus came along and told the Pharisees that:

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8. *Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles). So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (Mark 7 v 1-6)*

## *Jesus and the Outcasts*

*“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the Kingdom of God ahead of you”* (Matthew 21 v 31),

he didn’t win too many friends in high places!

But in answer to the question: Who shall be in the Kingdom of God? Jesus answers: “The Kingdom belongs to the poor.”

### **The Kingdom belongs to the Poor**

Again, I choose three well-known passages from the Gospels to illustrate.

#### *The Story of the Wedding Feast (Luke 14 v 7-24)*

There is in Luke’s Gospel, the lovely story of the Wedding Feast. Luke tells us that Jesus was invited to a feast by one of the leaders of the Pharisees – not any old Pharisee, mind you, but one of the leading Pharisees! As the meal got under way, we are reminded that the most important guests made sure that they got the places of honour, as was the custom. So when the meal was over, and Jesus, as the invited guest, was asked to give his after-dinner speech, he tells them:

*“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.”* (Luke 14 v 8-9)

You can imagine the guests being embarrassed. Possibly what Jesus described may actually have happened and some very honoured guest was, to their great shame, seated in the lowest place. You can imagine them whispering to each other: “Who does he think he is? We give him a fine good meal – it looks as if he hasn’t eaten for days – and then he turns around and insults us.”

But when Jesus is finished addressing the guests, he turns to his host and says: “When you give a feast, don’t invite the likes of these” – or words to that effect!



*"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."* (Luke 14 v 12-14)

Then someone speaks up from amongst the guests, to ask:  
*"Who shall be in the Kingdom of God?"*

And Jesus tells the story of the wedding feast – when the day comes, all who were invited make their excuses. The person giving the feast got angry and sent his servants out into the streets of the town to bring in *"the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame"*, exactly the same people that he urged his host to invite to his own feast. In answer to the guest's question: "Who shall be in the Kingdom of God?" Jesus answers "the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind."

But there is still room. Luke often adds a little addition to his stories, and sometimes the addition is just as important as the story. Here, the person giving the feast sends out his servants again, but this time with the instruction "compel them to come in". I always wondered: What is this about? What about their civil rights? If they don't want to come in, is it right to compel them to come in?

The analogy I would use to understand this instruction is that of a homeless person wandering the lanes of a country road close to a small town, all his belongings in a little plastic bag. And in that town, in a magnificent mansion on the top of the hill, there lived a very wealthy and important man. Along comes a servant from the mansion, who says to the homeless person: "The owner of that big house is giving a party tonight, and he has sent me especially to invite you." What do you think would be the reaction of the homeless person? I imagine it would be something like: "Come off it, you're having me on, you're playing a joke at my expense. The guy up in that house wouldn't want the likes of me there. I'll go up with you, and everyone will be looking at me and laughing, and I'll be kicked out as soon as I get in. No way, there's no way I'm going up there."

## Jesus and the Outcasts

At the time of Jesus, the poor did not believe that there would be a place for them in the Kingdom of God. So Jesus says, “Go out, *compel* them to come in. It is only when they are in, and eating from the feast, that they will then realize, it really was true, the Kingdom is for us.”<sup>9</sup>

At the feast in the Kingdom will be the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, those who were rejected and despised by their society.

### Jesus’ first Sermon (Luke 4 v 16-21)

The second passage I would use to illustrate would be Jesus’ first sermon. The very first words that Jesus utters in Luke’s Gospel are intended by Luke to be a summary of Jesus’ whole mission. Those first words are:<sup>10</sup>

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor”*

Jesus came to bring the Good News to the poor. What was that good news? Well, two chapters further on, in his Beatitudes, Luke answers that question. The Good News is that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor.

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9. “Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’” (Luke 14 v 16-24)

10. “When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”” (Luke 4 v 16-22)

## **The Beatitudes (Luke 6 v 17-26)**

All commentators agree that Luke's Beatitudes are closer to the original words of Jesus than Matthew's Beatitudes: Matthew adapts them to meet the needs of the particular group whom he was addressing.

And what do Luke's Beatitudes say:

*"Then he looked up at his disciples and said:*

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*

*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."* (Luke 6 v 20-21)

"Those who weep" most likely refers, not to those who are grieving or bereaved, but to those who suffer the daily struggle to survive.

## **The Kingdom of Jesus v Kingdom of Institutional Religion**

So the Kingdom that Jesus revealed was radically different in two ways from the Kingdom which the Jewish authorities believed in:

a) First, entry into that Kingdom was through compassion and there was no other gate by which you could enter.

b) And secondly, the Kingdom belonged, not to the righteous who kept the Law, but to the poor.

The God that Jesus revealed was also, therefore, radically different in two ways from the God of Jewish theology:

a) First, God is passionate about God's children, particularly those who are suffering; the Law was intended to teach us how to relate to God and to one another in compassion but it was not meant to be an end in itself. God is not particularly interested in whether we observe all the details of the Law or not – and certainly not at the expense of compassion.

b) And secondly, God has a special place in God's heart for those who are poor, excluded, unwanted, and rejected. They too

## *Jesus and the Outcasts*

are God's children and the way they are treated pains God immensely. In the Kingdom, God's justice will be done.

### **Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees**

Now, when my time is over and I arrive – as we all will – at the gates of Heaven, I will have one question for God: “If it is so important for us to believe in you, why did you make it so difficult? Could you not, now and again, have given us a little sign that you exist? Maybe you could have gone around the rivers of Ireland, say once a year, and do a little parting of the waters so that everyone could cross over, and then people would be able to say, ‘yes, now I know God exists; I have seen the sign.’”

What will God reply? I think I know what God will say. Because the Jewish authorities asked him the same question.

### **The Pharisees ask for a sign**

When Jesus came with this radically different understanding of God and God's Kingdom, naturally they asked him for a sign that he was speaking the truth from God. But Jesus refused.<sup>11</sup>

*“No sign shall be given to this generation.”*

Now, I always thought that was a little unreasonable of Jesus – the least he could have done was to give them a sign. So what is going on here?

Like myself at the gates of Heaven, the Pharisees were asking for a miraculous sign:

But Jesus knew that miracles prove nothing – every generation has its magicians!

### **John the Baptist asks for a sign**

In fact Jesus was giving them signs all along, but they couldn't recognize them.

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11. *“The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, “Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.” (Mark 8 v 11-12)*

*“Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven.” (Luke 11 v 16)*

One person asked for a sign and got it – John the Baptist.<sup>12</sup> He sent his messengers to Jesus to ask:

*"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"*

A straight-forward question: Give us a sign. And what does Jesus say:

*"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."*

The signs that Jesus was from God were the signs of compassion. Jesus cured people, not to prove he was from God, but out of compassion. He often told those he had cured to go away and tell no-one what had happened. When he raised the young man to life, a young man who was the only son of his mother and she was a widow, we are told explicitly that Jesus "felt sorry for her."

When you look at a little baby in the pram, you say: "Oh, isn't he gorgeous – the image of his father" (or mother), depending on which parent is present! How do you know that the child is the child of the parent? Because you recognize in the child the same features that you see in the parent.

What Jesus was trying to say was something similar: "God is compassion; therefore you can only recognize the Son of God by the Son's compassion. And if you cannot recognize, by my compassion, that I have come from God, then you do not know God."

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12. *"The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"* When the men had come to him, they said, *"John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"* Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, *"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."* (Matt 7 v 18-23)

## *Jesus and the Outcasts*

And if God is compassion, and you can only know the Son of God by the Son's compassion, John tells us that you can only know the disciple of God by the disciple's compassion.

*“By this shall all know that you are my disciples, by your love for one another.”* (John 13 v 35)

I am inclined to change this to: “by your compassion for one another”, with apologies to John. What is the characteristic of Christian love?

A sister working in Ethiopia during the severe famine of the 1980s tells the story of a man lying in the gutter, too weak from hunger to move. Everyone was just passing by. The sister asked someone: “Why is no one going to help him?” The answer she got was: “Because he is from a different tribe, sister. But you, you are a Christian, you ought to go and help him.”

The *characteristic* of Christian love is its *universality* – if we exclude any human being from our love, then our love is not Christian love. If the characteristic of Christian love is its universality, then the *test* of Christian love is whether we are willing to try and love even those whom we would prefer not to love, those we want nothing to do with, those who have offended us, those whom we have pushed to the margins of our society. Hence I don't think John would have any difficulty with us changing his text to: “by your compassion.”

As I said previously, what identified us as Catholics, when I was growing up, was our observance of clearly defined laws. Even today, parents will approach you to discuss their worry that their son or daughter, or grandchild, is no longer going to Mass. They identify going to Mass on Sunday with being a Catholic. They fear that they have now dropped out of the Church and that therefore, perhaps, they are out of favour of God.

What identifies us as a follower of Jesus is our compassion.

*“Be compassionate as your Heavenly Father is compassionate”* (Matt 5 v 48)

So what will God say to me, then, at those gates of Heaven?

“When your faith grew dim, where should you have gone to have your faith restored? To the river bank to observe some miraculous sign. Moving statues? Forget it. What God is interested in playing games with water or statues. No, to have your faith restored, you should have looked at the countless acts of compassion, at the small, hidden efforts of countless people reaching out to the sick, the lonely, the depressed, the unwanted, and *there* you would have found the evidence that I, who am compassion, exist. And if you cannot see, in those acts of compassion, the presence of God in your world, then you do not know God.”

And God may continue: “when the faith of others grew dim, were they able to have their faith renewed by the witness of your own compassion?”

### **The Last Judgement Scene again**

When I was going to school, I was made to believe that at the Last Judgement, McVerry would have to stand up there in front of everyone and all his sins would be read out and the few good things he did would be read out, and the weighing scales would be produced to see if I deserved to get into the Kingdom or not. And after McVerry, then Joe Bloggs would have to get up and then John Doe and so on. I think that after the first few hundred thousand, it's going to get very boring!

So maybe the Last Judgement is not about the revelation of McVerry, or anyone else, to the world but maybe it is God's final revelation of who God is, to the world. Here we have the whole world gathered before God and now, finally, once and for all, God reveals who God is.

And who is God? God is compassion. So what better way of revealing that God is compassion than by ushering into the Kingdom all those who were made to suffer here on earth, all those who were unwanted, rejected, cast out, despised. They enter the Kingdom of God, not because they lived better lives than the rest of us, not because they were more moral than the rest of us – but because God is compassion.

And the rest of us? We will be left scratching our heads and wondering if we, too, might get in. We will get in if we have

## *Jesus and the Outcasts*

made friends with the poor. If we have reached out to the poor and tried to relieve their pain, then they will turn around and invite us into *their* Kingdom. But if we have simply ignored the poor, then how can we expect *them* to invite *us* into *their* Kingdom.

They will – through forgiveness. But that’s for another talk.

The Kingdom belongs to the poor. We still have to ask: “Well, who exactly are the poor? “ I don’t like the term ‘poor’, it sounds patronising, it is also very vague, and if we are to follow on the path that Jesus walked, if we are to be compassion to the poor, we have to ask who are the poor that we are talking about. Your own mission statement commits you to “seek for a more just and compassionate life that respects human rights, especially those of the weakest.” Elsewhere, in the prioritisation of ministries, you talk about “the neglected and the poor.” Who exactly are we talking about?

We also have to ask: “What is this Kingdom that is offered to the poor?” Was Jesus talking about Heaven – I don’t think so. Jesus didn’t come to tell us about Heaven and who goes there, Jesus came to tell us who God is. So who are the poor and what is this Kingdom that is offered to them, are the topics for the next two talks.

But today, perhaps for our prayer, we might take the passage in Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 4, where Jesus defines his mission, and therefore our mission:

*“When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” And he*



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*rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4 v 16-22)*

We rest before God with the passage in our consciousness – and wait.

## *Option for Poor*

Your constitutions say: “*Marists share the Church's duty to denounce injustice* (that is the theme of this talk) *and to show solidarity with the oppressed*” (that is the theme of tomorrow's talk on The Kingdom of God).

This talk on the Option for the Poor and tomorrow's talk on The Kingdom of God are the two central talks of this retreat. Everything so far has been a preparation for them and everything subsequently will be a re-visiting of concepts such as sin, sacraments, Eucharist, Church and spirituality in the light of these two talks.

Again, I say: Do not believe anything I say until you have first tested it against three things:

1. First, against your own experience. There is enormous experience in this room and God reveals himself to us through that experience. If what I say does not pass the test of your own experience, reject it.
2. Secondly, in the light of your own personal, intimate relationship with God. If what I say does not help you to deepen that relationship, reject it.
3. Thirdly, test it against the authenticity of your own humanity. If what I say does not make you more human, it will not make you more divine.

So where are we now? We are rooted in our belief in and experience of the infinite and unconditional love of God. That is our security and our only security. When the storms come, the winds blow and the rain falls – which it will if we live the Gospel – that is our immovable foundation.

We believe in a God of compassion, not a God of judgement. To believe in a God of compassion, we have to know that we are a sinner. Like the younger brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, we have to know that only through the compassion and

forgiveness of God are we saved. A saint is not a person who does not sin – no such person exists! A saint is a sinner who knows that they are a sinner and therefore totally dependent on God's compassion.

### **The Meditation**

St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, suggests a meditation, which I will outline here but expand at the end of this talk and propose to you for your prayer today:

- First, to imagine God looking down on our world, seeing all the people on earth, “some white and some black, some in peace and others in war, some weeping and others laughing, some well and others ill, some being born and others dying.”
- Second, to imagine God listening to what the people on earth are saying, “how they are talking with one another, how they blaspheme etc.”
- And finally, to imagine what the Divine Persons are saying and doing, “working the redemption of the human race.”

If Ignatius were to propose this exercise today, perhaps he would say:

- First, to imagine God looking down on our world, seeing all the people on earth, “some starving, some dying for lack of clean water, some living on the streets even in wealthy cities, children being abused, growing up in poverty, people lonely, unwanted, abandoned, rejected.”
- Second, to imagine God listening to their cries, “how they are asking for help and pleading for someone to save them.”
- And finally, to imagine what the Divine Persons are saying and doing as they witness the suffering of so many people, and deciding to send the Second Person of the Trinity to earth.

## Option for Poor

### *The Mission of Jesus – The Kingdom of God*

It is not credible to think that the plight of those who suffer in our world, and their cries for help, then and now, is not central to God's concern and to the intervention of God, through Jesus, in our world. In this context, the call in your Constitutions becomes very concrete:

*“(Marists) come to share Mary’s zeal for her Son’s mission in his struggle against evil, and to respond with promptness to the most urgent needs of God’s people.” (Art II.8)*

The image of the parent with two children, one doing the homework and the other being beaten up outside, which I shared in an earlier talk, was an attempt to describe what is commonly referred to as “God’s Option for the Poor.”

The “Option for the Poor” was a concept that was used a lot in the 70s and 80s, a concept derived largely from Latin America and Liberation Theology. We don’t hear too much about the “Option for the Poor” these days, which raises the question for me: “What has happened to us, and to the Church in the developed world, that this central concept in the Gospels has faded into the background?” As I said before, I believe that we have been seduced by the comfortable lifestyle available to us in the Western world which has diverted us from living the radical demands of the Gospel.

I would identify four steps that we have to take to make an Option for the Poor, four questions which we have to answer.

The theme of the last talk was “The Kingdom belongs to the Poor”, and I said that we still had to ask what exactly do we mean by the “Poor”. The first step in making an Option for the Poor, then, is to ask the question: “Who are the poor?”

### **1. Who are the Poor?**

You are asked, in your Constitutions, to “*attend especially to the most neglected, the poor and those who suffer injustice.*” (Art II. 12). Who are we talking about? To answer the question, I would go back again to the Gospels.

In the story of the life of Jesus, there were three groups to whom he reached out in a preferential way:

- The first group were the sick, the lame, the blind, the deaf, the dumb - those who are afflicted with some infirmity.
- The second group were the poor – the vast majority of the population of Israel, whose life was hard, who struggled to make ends meet, and many of whom survived from day to day.
- Thirdly, public sinners, notably tax collectors and prostitutes.

What had these three groups got in common? What they had in common was the attitude of society towards them and the way they were treated by the society in which they lived. They were all despised, looked down upon, treated as second-class citizens, excluded, kept at arm's length.

They shared this attitude for different reasons.

- The infirm were looked down upon because it was believed that they (or their parents) had committed some sin and were being punished by God. God was angry with them; they were no friends of God. And so, those in society, who were righteous, believed that if the infirm were out of favour with God, then they should also be out of favour with God's friends. They were, therefore, consigned to the margins of their society. John's gospel tells us:

*"As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9 v1-2)*

- Similarly, the poor were despised because they didn't keep the Law. They didn't keep the Law because they didn't know the details of the Law. Again, John reminds us:

*"The temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not arrest him?" The police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" Then the Pharisees replied, "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the*

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*Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law – they are accursed." (John 7 v 45-49)*

- And public sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes, were despised because of their way of life. God could not possibly want anything to do with them. Therefore God's friends should want nothing to do with them either.

*"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner." (Luke 7 v 36-39)*

What the groups that Jesus preferentially reached out to had in common was that they were all marginalized in the society to which they belonged. They were marginalized because their society believed that God had also marginalized them. The attitudes of society towards them and the way society treated them ensured that they were kept apart.

So why did Jesus reach out to those who were marginalised in society? Again, we come back to the central concept of dignity. As I said before, one way of summing up the whole revelation of Jesus is to say that, *as God is the parent of us all, every human being has the same dignity of being a child of God, no matter who we are or what we may have done.*

When Jesus comes and finds some whose dignity as children of God is being undermined or denied by the attitudes of society and the way in which they are treated, then he must protest, if he is to be true to the revelation of God which he came to bring. And he protests in three different ways. These ways are, I believe, relevant to our ministry too.

1. First, Jesus affirms their dignity by the way in which he himself relates to them.

By reaching out to them in a preferential way, he communicated to them a sense of their own dignity, in the face of the contrary message which they were continually receiving from society. It is as if Jesus was saying to them: "Society may not

want much to do with you, society may look down on you but I, and the God from whom I come, we acknowledge your dignity, the same dignity as any other human being in this society.”

We Christians too are called to reach out and relate in a respectful way to those whose dignity is denied to them by being pushed to the margins of society.

An example might be when you move into a new parish, and you decide to visit the parishioners, where do you start? Do you begin by visiting the more respectable areas or by visiting the poorer areas? By visiting the poorer areas first, you are sending a message, not only to those who live in those areas, but also to the whole parish, that the poor have a priority for you.

2. Secondly, Jesus challenges the *attitudes* of his society which look down upon such people, and he challenges the *structures* which keep them in their marginalized place.

Thus he challenges the attitude of Simon who showed himself to be embarrassed and offended by the presence of a woman who was a sinner, who came into his house to wash the feet of Jesus and dry them with her hair<sup>13</sup>.

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13. “One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him - that she is a sinner.” Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “Speak.” “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7 v 36-50)

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*"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him: "Simon, I have something to say to you."*

He breaks the Law, and supports his disciples who break the Law, when that Law did not allow him to reach out in compassion.<sup>14</sup>

And he challenged the structures of his society, but that is the theme of the another talk.

So too we are called to challenge the attitudes and structures of our own societies which keep people on the margins.

3. The third way in which Jesus affirmed the dignity of those on the margins of his own society was not of his own choice. It was imposed on him. His affirmation of their dignity, by his own association with them, led Jesus himself to become marginalized. This is, in fact, the ultimate affirmation of their dignity. As the opposition from the religious authorities grew, and Jesus too came to be rejected and pushed to the margins, he does not pull back or change his mind but continues, even to death, to stand up for and accompany those who were despised.

And we too are called to make his Option for the Poor no matter what the consequences for ourselves.

The Option for the Poor then does not just mean the economically poor. There are other groups in our societies who are marginalised, some of whom may not be economically poor, such as people with intellectual disabilities, gypsies, and so on, to

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14. *"Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13 v 10-16)*



whom the option for the poor applies. Jesus reached out to the tax collectors who were certainly not poor; he also reached out to the prostitutes, some of whom were presumably doing quite well! In your mission statements, the focus is strongly on the “socio-economically” poor. I think the value of that focus is to remind us that the vast majority of those who are marginalised in our world, and in our societies, are in fact marginalised by being economically poor. Those who resist the notion of ‘option for the poor’ are most often resisting any suggestion of *economic* re-distribution which would impact on them. Sometimes such people want to expand the concept of “the poor” to mean anyone who has any need. A sister once tried to justify a private school in the Philippines, which educated the children of the rich including the children of President Marcos, on the grounds that they, being the children of a ruthless dictator, were very needy. No doubt they were very needy and it was a good and Christian response to reach out to their need, but it was not an ‘option for the poor’. If we expand the meaning of “the poor” to include everyone who has any need, then the word ‘poor’ simply becomes identical to the word ‘human being’ as we all have needs that ought to be ministered too.

So to be compassionate then, as Jesus was compassionate is to reach out to those who are marginalised in any way in our societies and thereby their dignity is diminished or taken away. A question I often ask of a group is: “Who do you not want living beside you?” This helps to identify those groups in our society who feel that they are marginalised.

## **2. Why are they poor?**

The next step in making an option for the poor is to ask the question: “Why are they poor and marginalised?”

If someone has a toothache, you don’t give them a carton full of aspirin and tell them to take two every four hours for the rest of their life, and they won’t feel the pain. No, you get them to the dentist and the dentist gets to the root cause (excuse the pun) of the toothache and the person’s toothache will disappear. So if we are to be compassionate to the poor, we have to ask: “Why are

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they poor?” and tackle the root cause of their poverty and marginalisation.

All answers to this question fall into one of two categories:

α) First, *there is a defect or deficiency in the poor person which causes them to be poor*. Thus we may say: ‘The poor drink too much; they are too lazy to work; they are likely to rob us’ or, more dangerously, we may say: ‘They lack education’. Of course some poor people drink too much, some are too lazy but these characteristics are not confined to the poor – I know Jesuits who drink too much and will do as little as they can get away with; and you probably know Marists who do the same! And of course many poor people do lack education. But many jobs do not require the educational level that is asked for – education simply becomes a filter mechanism by which we separate those who will be employed and those who will be jobless.

β) The second category into which answers to this question falls is: *there is a defect or deficiency, not in the poor person, but in the way our society is organised*. In South Africa, during the apartheid years, the poverty and marginalisation of black people was largely due to the apartheid structure. And their situation could never have been remedied without a change of structures. Homeless children do not live on the streets because there is something wrong with them; they are on the streets because of problems in their family over which they have no control. And we do not expect homeless children to solve their own problem of homelessness. No, they are on the streets because our societies have failed to establish adequate structures which would provide them with somewhere to live.

The poor in our world, and in our different societies, are in this situation because of the way our societies are organised.

If we believe that this is true, then two radical consequences follow:

*A Political Christianity*

If, today, we are to reach out to the poor in compassion, then we have to change the way our societies are organised – we have to be political, with a small ‘p’. In another talk, I will look at how Jesus addressed this issue. Here, however, I just want to make the point without going into any details.

The analogy I would use is: Imagine someone lying by a river, on a lovely sunny day; he is enjoying the sun, the peace and the quiet. Next moment, he sees a body floating down the river. So he jumps in, pulls the body out of the river, gives them the kiss of life, revives them and they go on their way. No doubt this is an act of compassion. He settles down again to enjoy the day, when another body comes floating down the river. He jumps in, pulls them out, kiss of life, and off they go. Then another body, and another. He keeps jumping in and pulling them out. At some point, he must say to himself: “I’d better go up-river and see where all these bodies are coming from.” So up he goes, finds a bridge where an oil tanker has crashed, the oil is spilt across the bridge, the parapet of the bridge has been demolished and everyone walking across the bridge slips on the oil, falls over the side of the bridge and into the river. So he cleans up the oil, puts a rope across the side of the bridge and there are no more bodies floating down the river.

Jumping into the river and rescuing the bodies is what Mother Theresa did – it was an extraordinary witness to the compassion of God. Fixing the bridge is what Oscar Romero tried to do; having become Archbishop of San Salvador, he came to realise that the suffering of his people was due to the structures of his society, supported by the violence of the military, and in challenging those structures, he lost his life.

Why do the structures in our societies keep the poor on the margins? Generally, our politicians are reasonably decent, often very compassionate, people. How can decent people maintain structures which oppress the poor?

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Imagine someone who lives in a flat on the top floor of a house. Eight o'clock in the morning and he pulls back the curtains. The sun shines in. He looks out into the back garden and watches the birds looking for worms on the beautifully cut grass, the multi-coloured flowers swaying in the breeze. He says to himself: "Isn't it a wonderful day."

However, someone may live in the basement flat of the same room. Eight o'clock in the morning and he pulls back the curtains. Nothing happens. The sun can't get in. He looks out the window into the back garden but all he sees is the white-washed wall of the outside toilet. He can't see the grass, or the birds or the flowers. He doesn't know what sort of day it is.

Here you have two people looking out of the same house, at the same time of the same day, into the same back garden, but they have two totally different views; there is a view from the top and a view from the bottom.

In our societies, there are two totally different views – indeed more than two, but to keep the analogy simple, we will say two; there is a view from the top and a view from the bottom. If you are in a well-paid, pensionable job, and you live in a lovely house in a nice neighbourhood, and your children are going to Third Level Education with the expectation of a good job when they qualify, then you are inclined to say that the structures of your society – the housing structures, the employment opportunities, the educational structures – are very good. Ireland – or wherever – is a wonderful place to live.

But if you are unemployed, and you live on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor of a tower block and the lifts aren't working, and your children are bored in school and can't wait to leave, with little prospect of any sort of reasonable job, then you might think the housing structures are terrible, the educational structures are worthless, the employment opportunities are almost nil, then you might be inclined to say that Ireland – or wherever – is a terrible place to live.

The problem is not that there are two, or more than two, views of what is happening in society; the problem is that all the decisions in society are made by people with the view from the top. All the decisions in the financial, business, political worlds are made by well educated people on very good salaries, in

permanent, pensionable jobs, nice houses in nice neighbourhoods, and whose children will have privileged access to the best that society can offer. And those decision makers have no idea how people at the bottom have to live. Yet they are making decisions which affect the lives of those at the bottom.

The first radical consequence of accepting that the poor and the marginalised are where they are because of the way our societies are organised, is this: if we are to reach out to them today in compassion, we have to be political, to seek to change the way our societies are organised.

The challenge that Jesus posed by eating with sinners lay in the simple, but deeply profound, act of looking at a human being whom society considered of little value, of little use, of little worth, and recognising that person's extraordinary dignity as a child of God. That simple act of reaching out and caring for someone whom most people considered of no value, reflected God's vision of humanity, and the compassion of God. But it was not just an act of compassion; it was a profoundly political act. Jesus knew it. The religious leaders knew it. It led to a confrontation between them. And Jesus lost. The crucifixion was another political act, the inevitable consequence of that political act of associating with those on the margins.

If we work with the poor, we will be praised by society, they will even give us money to help us in our work. If we try to change the structures so that they can benefit the poor, we will be crucified by those very same people who used to praise us. As the former Archbishop of Recife in Brazil, Helder Camara, once famously said:

*"If I feed the hungry, they call me a saint. If I ask why are they hungry, they call me a communist."*

We are sometimes told that religion and politics should be kept apart. But that was not Jesus' way. His caring and insistence on the dignity of every person as a child of God had political implications for the ordering of his own society. Caring, today, also often has political consequences; caring today is often a political act.

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You might argue that changing social, economic or political structures is not the function of the Church. But affirming the dignity of every human being is at the very centre of the Church's mission. And where social, economic or political decisions, policies or structures deny that dignity to some people, then changing such policies and structures are not excluded from the mission of the Church. This is indeed the whole point of the church's Social Teaching.

Your own mission statement from the 27<sup>th</sup> General Chapter commits you to "*seek for a more just and compassionate life that respects human rights, especially those of the weakest*" (No.15)

*A personal decision:*

As I said, there is a second radical consequence to accepting that the structures of our societies need to change. It is one which each of us has to reflect on in prayer and discernment. It is this: *If the structures of our societies keep people poor and on the margins, then, to what extent can I, morally, benefit from those structures?*

This is a question about our quality of life and lifestyle. I live, as it were, on top of the structures; my life is supported by the structures of my society: those structures give me my lifestyle, my quality of life, the opportunities which I can enjoy. But if those same structures are keeping people poor and suffering, then to what extent can I, morally, benefit from those structures. That is a question I want to just leave floating in the air, because it is a question that each of us must answer in the quiet of our own conscience. Perhaps it is question for our reflection today. Perhaps to reflect also on your own Constitutions where you are asked to "*take care that their dwellings, possessions and manner of life bring them closer to the poor*" (Art V. 226).

Or again: "*Aware that it is easier to adapt to one's surroundings than to remain faithful to the Gospels...*"

Caring and compassion had personal implications for Jesus and his own life, turning many of his contemporaries against him and mobilising the authorities to get rid of him. So too our caring may also have personal implications for our own lives.

### **3. Whose role is it to change the structures?**

The final two questions in making an option for the poor, I will just mention briefly. If the problem, in our world and our own societies, is that those who make the decisions have the view from the top, and have little understanding of the view from the bottom, then change involves making the view from the bottom heard and listened to and respected.

Who has the primary responsibility for doing this? It must be the poor themselves, for two reasons:

- 1) First, the poor are the only ones who have the view from the bottom. I might live with the poor, work with the poor, but I am not poor. I have an education which many of those who are poor do not have; I don't have to worry about the police coming to my door to tell me that my child is on drugs or caught in a stolen car; if I get a nervous breakdown, my provincial will take me out of the neighbourhood in which I am living, and put me in Clongowes (a Jesuit boarding school for wealthy kids) where I would probably have another nervous breakdown. If I live or work with the poor, I might have a good idea of what it is like to be poor, but I can never *know* what it is like to be poor.
- 2) The second reason why the poor themselves must bring about the changes is that their dignity requires it. If I, a middle-class priest, think that I can go and live with the poor, identify the changes that need to be made and then go out and try to bring about those changes, then I am patronising the poor again. I am saying to them that they are not able to do it themselves, we have to do it for them.

### **4. What is our role?**

So, if the poor themselves are to seek to bring about the changes which will lift them out of poverty and from the margins, where do we come in? Our role is to support them, in whatever

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way we can. Our role is to empower them, not to do it for them. We are to walk *with* them; not *in front of* them and certainly not *behind* them but to walk *alongside* them. In that way, we respect their dignity and we acknowledge that we have only a limited understanding of their poverty. I will talk more about our role in changing structures in the next talk.

### The Meditation

Finally, back to the mediation which I mentioned at the beginning.

- Imagine God looking down at the world you live in, at the people with whom you work, at their suffering, their struggle; Reflect on their lives, their feelings.

Stay with them for a while – watch them as they go about their day – see their anguish – see how they love their children – how they are pained for their children.

- Imagine God listening to them, as you listen to them; listen to what they are saying to each other  
listen to what they are saying to themselves in private  
listen to what they are asking God.

Stay with their cries for a time.

- Imagine what God decides to do; these are his beloved children.

What would you do if you were God?

Read the following passage from Exodus:

*“Yahweh then said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying for help on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. And I have come down to rescue them from the clutches of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that country, to a country rich and broad, to a country flowing with milk and honey. Yes indeed, the Israelites' cry for help has reached me, and I have also seen the cruel way in which the Egyptians are oppressing them.*”



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*So now I am sending you to Pharaoh, for you to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'*

*Moses said to God, 'Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' 'I shall be with you,' God said."* (Exodus 3 v 7-12)

And whatever God decides to do, you, like Moses, are part of God's intervention.

## *God is Unfair: Sin and forgiveness*

This evening's talk is about sin. It will be a little shorter than the other talks, because there are no sinners here. Now, if I were giving a retreat to Jesuits, this talk would be the longest.

Have you difficulty in going to confession? I certainly have. And a lot of other people certainly have. In our parish in Dublin, we no longer have fixed times for confession because nobody goes. If someone wants confession – which is very rare – they have to go to the priest's house and ask for it. My problem is not with the concept of reconciliation, but with the sacrament of Penance as we currently structure it. God loves me unconditionally and therefore God forgives me unconditionally. The greatest love you can show to someone is to forgive them when they have wronged you. But an even greater love is to forgive them even when they have not asked for forgiveness. And God's love is infinite, God's forgiveness is infinite. Why do I need a priest to forgive me? If this sounds like heresy, wait till the end of the talk. All will become either very clear, or very muddy! Then, you have three choices: you can agree with what I say, or you can dismiss it out of hand, or you can reflect on it, and then dismiss it out of hand.

I will come back to the Sacrament of Reconciliation later. First, I want to talk about the notion of sin and forgiveness.

When I was growing up, I was taught that sin was any act or omission that was contrary to the law of God. Sin was doing what you shouldn't do, or not doing what you should do. It is somewhat of a caricature, but only somewhat, to say that, in this understanding of sin, if I really tried hard enough, I could become sinless! If I made sure to do everything I should do, and avoid doing everything I shouldn't do, where is my sin? Sometimes people come to confession – I'm sure many of you have had this experience – and say: "Bless me, Father, it is six months since my last confession, and I can't really think of anything I did wrong. I

told a few lies, I said a few swear words, and so on”. I ask myself what have we been preaching all these years!

In other words, sin was defined by reference to the law. Since the law is clear, you know exactly where you stand with God. You are in control of your relationship with God! Keep the law and God is pleased with you; break the law and God is angry with you. But we cannot control our relationship with anyone, never mind God.

I now have a different understanding of sin. For me, now, all sin is causing suffering or harm to another human being (or to myself, and hence ultimately to another). For me, sin is my complicity in causing or maintaining the suffering of others. There are two ways in which I am complicit in their suffering:

First, like the man at the side of the lake when the child was drowning, I understand sin now as my failure to reach out to try and relieve the suffering of others. Each day, I fail to reach out, I fail often even to notice the suffering of others, like the rich man with Lazarus at his door. I remember, as a child, finding my mother crying one day. I found out that she had pains in her stomach but she was afraid she had cancer and wouldn't go to the doctor. And I remember thinking at the time that she had been suffering for weeks and I hadn't even noticed her pain. My failure to reach out to try and remove some of the pain of those around me means that their pain continues. And thereby I have some responsibility for their on-going suffering. That is my sinfulness. We pray at the beginning of Mass for forgiveness for “what I have done, and *what I have failed to do.*” We really ought to go to confession many times every day, we have so much to ask forgiveness for!

So maybe you all are sinners after all, and this talk should go on for at least an hour and a half!

## **Structural Sin**

Secondly, I am complicit in the suffering of others through my participation in the structures which cause suffering to others.

## *God is Unfair: Sin and forgiveness*

I talked this morning about structures and our call to be compassionate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century involves changing those structures. I talked of the image of the person at the side of the river with the bodies floating down and how his compassion led him to go up and fix the bridge. Another analogy might be a road with a very bad bend; there are many accidents at this bend. Our compassion could lead us to set up a mobile medical clinic at the side of the road and every time an accident occurs, there is help at hand. Many lives could be saved by that act of compassion. However, I might decide to try and get the authorities to straighten the road! This will save even more lives. This change to the structure is just as much an act of compassion on our part.

Much of the pain that people suffer in our world, and in our societies, is caused by the way our societies and our world is organised, as for example in the former apartheid system of South Africa.

If sin is understood as causing suffering to another, then social or structural sin is the suffering that a *system* inflicts on others. Structural sin has been defined by Bernard O'Connor OP, a Dominican priest who lived in apartheid South Africa, as “the abiding deficiencies or wounds in the way society is structured.”

Sinful structures, using apartheid as an example because it is a very clear example, emerge as a result of a cumulative series of personal sins, sometimes going back generations, not only on the part of those who created the structures but also on the part of those who worked the system, those who supported the system and those who remained silent and did nothing to try to change the system. All share in the responsibility for the suffering the system imposed on black people.

### **Difficulties in acknowledging structural sin**

There are a number of difficulties with acknowledging our responsibility for structural sin.

One difficulty is that in our traditional understanding of sin as personal sin, it is clear who has sinned and therefore who

should repent and make amends. A sinful act is linked to a particular individual and the consequences of that sinful act or omission is evident in the harm which it causes to others.

However, the blame for the suffering caused by sinful structures cannot be laid at the feet of any specific individuals. It seems as if everyone and no-one is guilty. It is hard to know who should repent! If there is no-one to blame, then how can there be a sin?

Secondly, the connection between my actions and their harmful effect can be very complex. Purchasing a tracksuit in a reputable Dublin shop may be linked to the exploitation of children in sweatshop conditions. But I have no intention of harming anyone. The link between my action and the pain of others is via a complex, global structure. So, as I do not experience the consequences of my actions on others thousands of miles away, I may feel no obligation to accept responsibility for changing the sinful structures which are unconsciously maintained by my actions.

The poverty of the developing world is due, in part, to the failure of the Western, economically-developed, nations to open their markets to the exports of those countries, to pay a just price for their goods, and to forgive the un-payable debt they owe. I am part of this structure, even if I do not wish to be the cause of their suffering. I therefore share some responsibility for the poverty and suffering for many in economically developing nations, for which our policies and structures are, in part, responsible.

Similarly, in Ireland, I am part of a society that allows homeless children and adults to sleep on the street. I may not want that to happen, I may even be working to help homeless people, but by being part of that society that denies them a place to live, I share in the corporate responsibility for their suffering.

Thirdly, the complexity of the structures also creates a sense of powerlessness to do anything about them, even if we wanted to. What can I do about children working in sweatshops thousands of miles away; what can I do to influence the World Trade Organisa-

## *God is Unfair: Sin and forgiveness*

tion; what can I do to eliminate homelessness in Ireland? If there is little I can do, how can I be sinful in not doing it! Our participation in the structures can leave us feeling imprisoned within them, unable either to change them or escape from them. People feel at the mercy of the system.

### **The role of ideology**

But there is another, even greater, difficulty in acknowledging structural sin. Structural sin is legitimised and normalised by the images and concepts which shape the way we see reality and can blind us to the immorality of our involvement in the structures.

Today, we find it unimaginable that a society could tolerate slavery. But for hundreds of years, societies, God-fearing, Church-going people not only tolerated slavery but even justified it. Even St. Paul had no difficulties with slavery. The Jesuits in the US, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had no problem with owning slaves. The structure becomes embedded in our psyche, and we do not see the sinfulness of the structure.

This should make us suspect that today we are living in structures which are unjust, but which, because they have become so much a part of ourselves, that we not notice their sinfulness. For example, I may regret that people are homeless and living on the street, but believe that this is just the inevitable consequence of economic development – some people just get left behind. Some people are unemployed, but I may believe that this is just the way capitalism works – indeed, I might argue, quite rightly, that capitalism *requires* a small pool of unemployed people just to function properly. This is just the way things work, the way things are, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. So we have internalised the unjust system. How often have I heard people say: “Most poor people are too lazy to work, they have it too good on welfare”; or “homeless people *choose* to live on the streets”. We internalise, and therefore normalise and legitimise, the sinful structure in front of our eyes:

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*“We have eyes but cannot see (their suffering), ears but cannot hear (their cries).*

Thus, if the suffering is inevitable, and cannot be avoided, just a regrettable consequence of the way things are, then, of course, there is no sin. Sin only arises when a situation which is causing pain or suffering to others both can, and should, be changed – but isn't.

Thus we become ideologically conditioned to accept sinful structures, blinded to their negative consequences, and oblivious to the harmful effects that result from our participation in such structures. We can use such structures and in the process perform actions that are harmful to others, while our distorted consciousness makes us believe that we are, in fact, doing the right thing. Such distorted consciousness may consider the harm caused as “normal”, (for example, those who are unemployed), or at least “inevitable” (for example, those who are homeless) or even in some cases as “the will of God” (poverty, perhaps). As we internalize the system as constructed by society, the sinful structure becomes *a part and parcel of ourselves*. We become totally unaware of the sinfulness inherent in the way we live and we can be convinced that we are upright citizens and faithful followers of the Gospel.

We also have to acknowledge that there may be sinful structures within the Church, within our religious congregations and within our communities, which are causing pain and suffering to some, but which again we have internalised and legitimised and have become convinced that such structures are 'normal' and 'the way things are'. And so we are blinded to the pain they cause, and do not recognise their sinfulness.

And so too the poor. They too can become convinced that this is just the way things are, unfortunate but inevitable. They can come to be convinced that they are not the victims of an unjust set of structures which should be overcome, but just the unfortunate victims of a system that is inevitable and therefore unchangeable. They, too, have internalised the structures. The fact

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that sinful structures are internalised in our minds makes them very difficult to overcome.

Often the response to structural sin is to seek to replace the leaders in a society, or to dismantle structures that are identifiable with a particular group in society. The Marxist concept of class struggle would be an example of such a response to perceived, or real, unjust structures. But this is to ignore the fact that the structures have become embedded, hidden in the consciousness both of those who benefit from the structures and of its victims, and structural reforms, *on their own*, leave that consciousness intact. Structural reforms must be accompanied by conscientization, including our own.

Hence, as I mentioned in the last talk, our primary role in changing structures is one of raising awareness, amongst the victims of injustice, of the fact that their suffering and pain is not inevitable, that it is due to the way their society is organised, and to help them to acquire the tools which would help to bring about constructive change. It is the poor themselves who must change the structures; our role is to support them. We support them by conscientizing them – but first we have to conscientize ourselves!

Structural sin is only acknowledged when it is being overcome. While I may not be personally responsible for the creation of a sinful structure, I have a responsibility for overcoming it. Faced with sinful structures, apathy or neutrality is not possible; it becomes rather an option *for* the structures. As Albert Nolan OP, another Dominican priest who lived in apartheid South Africa, whose writings are, I'm sure, known to many of you, wrote:

*“Any preaching of the Gospel that tries to remain neutral with regard to issues that deeply affect the lives of people, like the issue of the rich and the poor, is in fact taking sides. It is taking sides with the status quo, even if that is not its intention, because its neutrality prevents change.” (Lectures on the Theology of Liberation)*



The acceptance of that responsibility for seeking to change sinful structures is a radical moment of grace for a person.

### **Trapped in my sinfulness**

Thus, through my involvement in sinful structures, I am trapped in my sinfulness. This is the Pauline notion of sin, sin is something we are trapped in, something we cannot escape from; we are sinners through and through, to the very core of our being.

But the fact that I am trapped, through sinful structures, in my sinfulness does not fill me with a useless and demoralizing sense of guilt; on the contrary, it makes me feel more responsible for doing something about the situations of structural sin within which I am trapped; for doing what little I can for those in the Third World, for those who are homeless, or unemployed, for refugees etc. Knowing that I am trapped in my sinfulness impels me to work for justice. It pushes me to see how I can respond more adequately to the suffering of others, to do what little I can, in the knowledge that the little I can do is of infinite value to others and to God.

*“Even a cup of water given to one of these little ones will not lose its reward”.*

But my struggle for a more just society and a more just world does not take away my sinfulness.

How can I be freed from my sinfulness? Not through anything I can do. For Paul, we are freed from our sin, not by our own efforts, but only through the gratuitous and undeserved forgiveness of Jesus Christ. I am a sinner through and through, but I am a sinner who is constantly being forgiven. I know that I am forgiven because I am loved unconditionally. The forgiveness of God frees me from my sinfulness. And God’s forgiveness is guaranteed. So knowing that I am trapped in my sinfulness impels me to ask, again and again, for forgiveness, in the knowledge that

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I am a sinner, but a sinner forgiven, and therefore a sinner full of joy.

Some people find the notion of God's unconditional forgiveness difficult to accept. Surely we have to repent first before God forgives us. But I wonder is it not the other way around: God forgives us unconditionally, and *then* we repent. When we come to understand the extraordinary love of God, which we experience in God's unconditional forgiveness, then we are ashamed and wonder how could we possibly have offended such a loving God. If we experience God's forgiveness in our lives, then we are filled with sorrow and repentance.

I would have that experience with some homeless people. When some of them first meet me, their only thought is "what can I get out of McVerry? How can I use him?" When you are homeless, you have to live by manipulating people. If they get the chance to rob me, of course they will take it. But if I find out and challenge them, and they realize that I have not written them off because of what they have done, but will continue to support them and work with them, some of them have become my most faithful supporters. They have experienced gratuitous forgiveness and they respond. I could leave a 50 euro note on the table and they wouldn't touch it – and if anyone else tried to take it, they would beat them up!

As I said in an earlier talk, we can never understand God. When we talk about God's forgiveness, we use a concept, "forgiveness", whose meaning comes from our experience of people forgiving one another, sometimes in a heroic and extraordinary way. But God's forgiveness goes infinitely beyond this human concept of forgiveness – like the kids wondering how far away are the stars.

Some will argue that, if we remove the threat of punishment, people will feel free to do whatever they want. We need a God who will punish wrong-doers. But this is to use God to control peoples' behaviour. God cannot be used.

The God that Jesus revealed was not a God of the Law, who punishes the wicked and rewards the good. God rather seeks out the sinner before the sinner seeks out God.<sup>15</sup>

*"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"*

Just as we are constantly being forgiven by God, without any merit on our part, so in the Gospels, Jesus emphasizes the need for us to forgive each other, again and again, freely and gratuitously.

*"Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'" (Matthew 18 v 21-22)*

As you know, seven was the number that signified perfection. Hence Peter's question was: "Must my forgiveness be perfect?" Jesus replies: "not only perfect, but way, way beyond perfect."

Jesus continues:

*"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants."*

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15. *"The tax collectors and sinners, however, were all crowding round to listen to him, and the Pharisees and scribes complained saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you with a hundred sheep, if he lost one, would fail to leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the missing one till he found it? And when he found it, would he not joyfully take it on his shoulders and then, when he got home, call together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, I have found my sheep that was lost.' In the same way, I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety-nine upright people who have no need of repentance.*

*Or again, what woman with ten drachmas would not, if she lost one, light a lamp and sweep out the house and search thoroughly till she found it? And then, when she had found it, call together her friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, I have found the drachma I lost.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one repentant sinner.'" (Luke 15 v 1-7)*

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*When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.*

*So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*  
(Matt 18 v 21-35)

The meaning of this story lies in the 'ten thousand talents'. In the story, the servant refused to forgive his fellow servant a debt of one hundred denarii. Now a denarius was the equivalent of a day's pay for a manual labourer. A hundred denarii, therefore, was the equivalent of three months wages, a not insignificant sum.

But the Master had forgiven the servant a debt of ten thousand talents. How long would you have to work to earn ten thousand talents? 150,000 years! Jesus uses this hugely exaggerated sum, which would be impossible for anyone to pay off, to illustrate how great is God's forgiveness; God's forgiveness is infinite, it is greater than any sin we can commit, and so, in

response to being forgiven so much, we ought in turn forgive one another.

And so the early Church understood that where any group of people live together, people will cause offence to and hurt one another, either consciously or unconsciously. They knew that there is a need for a mechanism to restore relationships that have been frayed or even broken. The Sacrament of Reconciliation was that mechanism. It was a structured way in which people could come to the community and confess that they had hurt some in the community, and the members of the community would in turn accept their repentance and restore relationships that had been broken. Hence the Sacrament of Reconciliation was an essential part of the structure of the early Christian community.

However, today, the Sacrament of Reconciliation has become so far divorced from the community, that it has become simply a channel of grace to me, as an individual. Of course, in theory, the priest represents the community, but for many, it is pretty theoretical! Going in to confess your sins to a priest, is, to some, usually older people, an important part of their relationship to God but for many others, and certainly most young people, it is a meaningless gesture. I think the communal confession ceremonies which some parishes have at times such as Christmas and Easter is far closer to the meaning of the Sacrament than individual confession.

And so, for our meditation, I would suggest you take the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears.

*“One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Phari-*

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*see who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7 v 36-50)*

Just rest in the joy of being a sinner, a sinner who has been forgiven. Experience the love of God, expressed in God's unconditional forgiveness. Rest, with Mary Magdalen, at the feet of Jesus.

## *The Kingdom or Community of God*

I said yesterday that I thought that this is the second most important talk of this week. I suggested, yesterday, that Jesus, in his own personal relationship with the poor, sought to change the structures under which they lived. And therefore so, too, should we. But how did Jesus seek to change the structures of his society? He was not a left-wing politician trying to persuade Herod to introduce structures more favourable to the poor. No, he set up a community who were to *live* by a new set of structures.

As I said in the introductory talk, while working with homeless young people, I puzzled over several questions:

One was: What is this Good News that Jesus preached? We often think of Jesus as a moral teacher: Jesus came to tell us how God wants us to live our lives, and if we obey his moral commands, then we will be rewarded with a place in Heaven. We understand that this is the Good News. Hence the Gospels are addressed to us, as *individuals*, and their teaching is summarized in the commandment: “Love one another.”

I have a lot of problems with that understanding of Jesus. My main problem is that Jesus did not die in bed of old age – he was crucified. You are not put to death for telling people to love one another – on the contrary, you get awards for doing that! Unless by love, you mean something so radical, so threatening to the ways things are, that the authorities feel that they must get rid of you.

In the meditation which I proposed in the last talk, imagine God looking down at our world, listening to the cries of those who are suffering. Imagine what the Divine Persons are saying to one another. Imagine how they decide to send the Second Person down to earth to bring the Good News.

What is the Good News which the Gospel brings to the one billion people on our planet who are living on the edge of destitution? What is the Good News which we, Ministers of the Gospel,

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bring to those who are losing their jobs in the current recession? What is the Good News that we bring to those who are poor and marginalized in our societies?

The Good News that Jesus preached was the coming of the Kingdom of God.

*'After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the gospel from God saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.'* (Mark 1 v 14-15)

What did Jesus mean by 'the Kingdom of God is close at hand'?

### **Jesus' Vision Statement**

These days, we all have to have vision statements. I spent thirty years working with homeless people and never heard of a vision statement. I don't think the work suffered. But then everyone, especially funders, kept asking for a vision statement! So we set up a committee who spent hours and hours trying to agree on a vision statement. Just when you thought you had agreement, someone wanted to change where the comma should go! Eventually, we got an agreed vision statement, but don't ask me what is, because I can't remember.

But two thousand years ago, Jesus issued his own vision statement. We find it in the Our Father, the prayer that Jesus gave to the early Christian community. There we read:

*"Thy Kingdom come (in other words, "Thy will be done") on earth as it is in Heaven."* (Luke 6 v 10)

Jesus' vision was that the Kingdom of God in Heaven, where God's will is always done, would be replicated here on earth. The early Christian Community understood, after the death and Resurrection of Jesus, that *they* were the Kingdom of God that Jesus, during his ministry, had proclaimed was close at hand.



To be faithful, then, to the mission which the early Church was given, namely, to be on earth the Kingdom of God, the community had to have certain characteristics: Here I just want to mention two; in a later talk, I will come back to other characteristics.

*1. First, the members of the Community were to live in radical solidarity with each other, sharing everything they had.*

The Kingdom of God in Heaven is a place where all our needs will be met. We will be infinitely happy, which means that we will have no unmet needs. Therefore, the early Church understood that their community, the community of God on earth, was to be a place where everyone's needs would be met. How were the needs of all to be met? By everyone in the community sharing what they had.

I read the Gospels now, not as addressed to me as an individual, but as instructions to the early Christian Community, as to how to be faithful to their mission. The Gospels reflect Jesus' concern, not so much for the Kingdom of God in Heaven, as for the Kingdom or Community of God on earth; not so much how I, as an individual, must live to get to Heaven, but how we, as a community, must live together here on earth. This has given me a whole new understanding of the Gospels. Reading the Gospel now, I imagine myself to be one of the early Christian community, at the Sunday assembly, listening to Jesus reminding us of how we must live together in order to be faithful to the mission given to the community by Jesus.

And so I listen to the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Five thousand men, not counting women and children, spent the whole day listening to Jesus. What he was saying could not have been irrelevant to them. They were so captivated by what he was saying – the Good News – that they even forgot that they were hungry. The disciples had to go up to Jesus and: “Would you ever shut up. The people are hungry. *Send the*

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*crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.*"<sup>16</sup>

The meaning of the story, for the early community, lay in Jesus' reply to the disciples:

*"They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*

Did Jesus feed five thousand people? I don't know, I doubt it. The truth in the story is not to tell us about an historical event in the life of Jesus, but to tell us how we are to live together. The early community understood that they were to live in radical solidarity with each other. If they shared what they had, then God would ensure that everyone had enough.

### **Two Rich Men (Luke 18 v 18 - 19 v 10)**

In Luke's Gospel, we have two stories of two rich men. In between the two stories, Luke tells the story of a blind man whose blindness is cured. This story is, for Luke, the clue which allows us to interpret the stories of the two rich men: the first rich man is blind, unable to see and respond to what God is asking – and his blindness remains; the second rich man is also blind – but his blindness is cured, and he realizes that he is called to share his resources with those in need.

The *first rich man* was a young man who came to Jesus to ask what he had to do to enter eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. On hearing that he has done so all his life, Jesus says:

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16. "When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children." (Matt 14 v 14-21)

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*"There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."*

And he cannot let go of his possessions, so his blindness remained. Here is a man, a very upright man, who has kept all the commandments since his youth, who is keen to do the right thing and approaches Jesus for advice and guidance. This man is every religious vocation director's dream – good living, idealistic, motivated. But he is not suitable for admission to the community.

Matthew tells us that *"Jesus looked steadily at him and he was filled with love for him"* (Matthew 10 v 21). Jesus loved him. This was not the issue. But despite his evident goodness, and God's love for him, he is not a suitable candidate for the new community of God because his unwillingness to share his resources for the benefit of those in the community who are in need makes him a *counter-sign* of the Kingdom of God in Heaven.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus then meets *another rich man, Zacchaeus*. In response to Jesus' invitation, Zacchaeus says:

*"Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."*

"If I have defrauded anyone!" The nerve of him! He spent his whole life ripping people off, especially the poor who had no one to intervene on their behalf. Here was a man whom no vocation director in his right senses would touch. But Zacchaeus

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17. "A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.'" He replied, "I have kept all these since my youth." When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" He replied, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God." (Luke 18 v 18-23)

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is invited into the community of God because, despite his past exploitation of people, and a lavish lifestyle funded by that exploitation, he has now found personal transformation through his encounter with Jesus which has led him to be a witness to that solidarity which is integral to the community of God.<sup>18</sup>

### **Ananias and Sapphira**

Again, in the Acts of the Apostles, we have the lovely story of Ananias. Ananias and his wife wanted to join the early Christian Community. He went to Peter – he wasn't a saint then – and Peter said: “No problem. But I hear you have a field. Go sell the field and bring the proceeds back and place them at the disposal of the community and then you can join.” So Ananias went off, sold the field and brought the proceeds back to Peter – but he kept a little back for himself! And Peter said: “Oh, Ananias, you have sinned before God and this community.” And Ananias and his wife dropped dead on the spot! Now, I'm sure they didn't! But it was a story to remind the community of this fundamental, non-negotiable condition for entering the community.<sup>19</sup>

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18. *“He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” (Luke 19 v 1 – 9)*

19. *“There was also a man called Ananias. He and his wife, Sapphira, agreed to sell a property; but with his wife's connivance he kept back part of the price and brought the rest and presented it to the apostles. Peter said, ‘Ananias, how can Satan have so possessed you that you should lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land? While you still owned the land, wasn't it yours to keep, and after you had sold it wasn't the money yours to do with as you liked? What put this scheme into your mind? You have been lying not to men, but to God.’ When he heard this Ananias fell down dead. And a great fear came upon everyone present. The younger men got up, wrapped up the body, carried it out and buried it. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had taken place. Peter challenged her, ‘Tell me, was this the price you sold the land for?’ ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that was the price.’*

Jesus' command: "*love one another as I have loved you*" was the basis of life together in the community. Just as Jesus was willing to sacrifice everything, even what was most valuable to him, namely his own life, for the sake of us, his brothers and sisters, so too the members of the community were to be willing to sacrifice everything, to share their resources, their time, their talents, their skills, even what was most valuable to them, for the sake of their brothers and sisters.

The early Church understood that everything we have is a free gift, given to us by God. Nothing belongs to us, we come into the world with nothing, we leave the world with nothing; during our stay here on earth we are given resources, skills, time and energy, not to accumulate for ourselves so that we can have a good time, but given to us for the benefit of all. The sharing and caring in the early community was so radical that others found it unbelievable – "*See how they love one another.*"

Matthew's well-known story of the Last Judgement scene was not, perhaps, about judgement at all! For Matthew, the Kingdom of God is where God lives, where we enter into the presence of God. The Last Judgement scene, then, I believe, is Matthew's description of a community where God is to be found. A community that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, that reaches out to meet the needs of all in the community, is a community where God is present.

*"For I was hungry and you gave me food – Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world."*

But a community which does not reach out to one another is a community from which God is absent.

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*Peter then said, 'Why did you and your husband agree to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Listen! At the door are the footsteps of those who have buried your husband; they will carry you out, too.' Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in they found she was dead, and they carried her out and buried her by the side of her husband. And a great fear came upon the whole church and on all who heard it.'* (Acts of Apostles 5 v 1-11)

## The Kingdom or Community of God

*“Go away from me, with your curse upon you.”*<sup>20</sup>

Marists are called to *“follow Jesus Christ and to place all that they are and have at the service of the Kingdom.”* (Art II. 11). This is the call for everyone who wishes to be a member of the community of Christ.

If I am preaching in a parish, I sometimes say: “If you want to be, and call yourselves, the community of God in this part of the world, then in this parish, there should be no-one hungry, no-one homeless, no-one living alone or in hospital who is not being visited, no-one in prison who has been abandoned by the community; no-one whose needs are not being addressed by the community.”

### 2. A Community of Radical inclusiveness

The Kingdom of God in Heaven is a place where everyone is equal, everyone is respected and cared for; where nobody feels rejected, or unwanted or marginalized or looked down upon.

If the Kingdom or Community of God on earth is to reflect this Kingdom of God in Heaven, then it must be a community

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20. *When the Son of man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory. All nations will be assembled before him and he will separate people one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me." Then the upright will say to him in reply, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome, lacking clothes and clothe you? When did we find you sick or in prison and go to see you?" And the King will answer, "In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." Then he will say to those on his left hand, "Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you never gave me food, I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink, I was a stranger and you never made me welcome, lacking clothes and you never clothed me, sick and in prison and you never visited me." Then it will be their turn to ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or lacking clothes, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help?" Then he will answer, "In truth I tell you, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me." And they will go away to eternal punishment, and the upright to eternal life.' (Matt 25 v 31-46)*

which reaches out and welcomes everyone, including those whom society does not want.

*“Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.”*

Seven simple words that any child could understand, but with an extraordinary depth of meaning. If you were a member of the early Christian community, and you heard this read out at the Sunday assembly, what would it have meant to you?

“Jesus” – who is Jesus? Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus is God.

“Jesus ate” – God eating – this would immediately bring to mind the Kingdom of God in Heaven, which is often presented as a feast at which God presides.

*“Who shall be at the feast in the Kingdom of God?”* Jesus was asked.

And who will be present there? Why, the tax collectors and sinners, those who were rejected and unwanted by society. Those who were *excluded* by society on earth were going to be *included* amongst God’s friends in the Kingdom of God in Heaven. Therefore, they were to be included and welcomed in the community of God on earth.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Kingdom belongs to the Poor**

A community where everyone shares and thereby meets the needs of all, and a community which is open to all, including those that are unwanted and excluded by society, is a community that is Good News to the poor.

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21. *“As Jesus was walking on from there he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him. Now while he was at table in the house it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ When he heard this he replied, ‘It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick.’”* (Matthew 9 v 9-11)

## *The Kingdom or Community of God*

But not such good news to those who are wealthy, because they are going to be asked to share their wealth, nor good news to the ‘respectable’, because they are going to have to live alongside the very people they have sought to exclude.

Hence Jesus understood that the majority of people in the Community of God on earth would be poor. Have we any evidence for this?

When the disciples, who represented the earliest Christian community, asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus gave them a prayer which only the poor could say.

In Jesus’ day, the poor had two concerns:

1. The first was getting enough to eat. If they had a little land, life was hard but they could normally grow enough to feed their family. But more and more were losing their land either through debt incurred to pay the oppressive taxation levied to keep Rome happy and to keep the authorities in their very comfortable lifestyle – hence the hatred for tax collectors – or else they lost their land through outright confiscation by Herod to give to his loyal supporters. They then entered a more desperate kind of poverty, living on the edge of destitution, surviving from day to day, occasionally getting a day’s work which paid enough to feed their family for that day, (Matt 20 v 1-16), but often going to bed at night not knowing if they would have food for tomorrow.

2. The second concern, indeed nightmare, for the poor was the possibility of falling into debt. If they had to borrow to feed their family, and could not repay, then they, and sometimes their whole family, would be sold into slavery to pay off the debt.

And so the prayer that Jesus gave his community to say was the prayer of every poor person in his time. In the *Our Father*, Jesus told the community to pray:

*“Give us this day our daily bread,  
forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are indebted to us.”* (Matt 6 v 11-12)



The rich could not say this prayer: they knew exactly where their daily bread was going come from and there was no question of them getting into debt. No, this was the prayer of the poor of his time.

This is the same Jesus who said:

*“Ask and you shall receive.”*

Jesus expected that the prayer of the poor would be heard. How would it be heard? *Through the radical love and sharing of the community.*

The Kingdom then belongs to the poor. In this community, the poor and the marginalised find their needs met and they find respect, whereas in the wider society they found their needs ignored and were treated with contempt. There was little in this community that was attractive to the rich and powerful, indeed it was to them a threat.

The Kingdom belongs to the poor. We might find this concept difficult to understand:

It can make the rest of us, who are not poor, feel excluded and not appreciated, particularly if we have tried to live good lives and do our best. But Jesus was not excluding us – he was putting it up to us! <sup>22</sup>

*“For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?”*

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22. “Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” (Luke 14 v 25-33)

## *The Kingdom or Community of God*

In other words, before entering this community, sit down and decide if you can really live this way. Can you live in radical solidarity with everyone else in this community, including the poor, thereby ensuring that the needs of everyone are met; can you live in a relationship of equality, respect and dignity with everyone else in this community, including those rejected by society?

If so, then you are welcome; if not, you may be a wonderful, hard-working, upright, morally just person – and God will love you for it – but a place in this community is not for you.

Don't join this community and then regret it in a few months time!

*“Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?”*

And so the Option for the Poor does not define *who* we are to work with. No, everyone, rich and poor alike, are children of God and loved with the same infinite and unconditional love. And we are called to evangelize everyone. But to evangelize those who are not poor, who are not marginalized, is to invite them into a deeper solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. I would have no problem with the Jesuits running schools for rich kids, if those young people were leaving school fired up with enthusiasm for working with and for the poor, aware of the sinful structures of their society and committed to changing them. But that does not, and indeed cannot, happen.

The Option for the Poor, then, is a *mindset*. It is a commitment that, regardless of who I am working with, the focus of my life and my work is firmly on the poor and on changing the structures which maintain them in their pain and in their marginalization.

## Changing structures through witness

Jesus sought to change structures by establishing a community which would live by different structures. This community was, by its own witness, to challenge the existing oppressive structures of society.

*“You are the light of the world,”* Jesus says

Jesus was not talking about me and you, and our good-living lives; no, he was talking about the community, the way the community lived together in radical love, caring and sharing, was a witness to the world of how people should live together.

*“You are the salt of the earth.”*

Jesus was not talking about me and you; no, the way the community lives together gives meaning to life and to living. But if the community stops living in love, then the salt has lost its flavour and has become useless.<sup>23</sup>

This community also had a missionary mandate. It was to become a project of transformation valid for all the nations.

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”* (Matt 28 v 19-20)

But a warning! In Ireland, we used to think that we were a model Christian country because 90% of our population went to Mass on Sunday. The Christian community must be judged, not by the *quantity* of its membership, not by the numbers who go to

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23. *“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.*

*“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp-stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* (Matt 5 v 13 –16)

## *The Kingdom or Community of God*

Church, but by the *quality* of its witness. At times, I think, we have lost the focus.

Imagine a community where everyone's needs were met through the caring and sharing of the community, where everyone felt valued, respected and appreciated, that surely would be the Kingdom of God on earth.

This new community, then, represents, in history, what God desires for all humanity in the face of poverty and oppression – a community which lives together in solidarity and equality, and so in justice and peace, over whom God can reign. It is intrinsically political – its very existence, with structures and values that are totally contrary to the structures and values in the wider society around them, poses a challenge to those structures and values. It therefore brings the community into conflict with the wider society.

*“If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too.”*

We will talk about that in the next talk.

So what is the Good News that Jesus proclaimed, that you bring today to the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, the starving in our world? *You* are the Good News, the love which you bring, a love that is willing to care and to share everything, that is the Good News. If *you* are not the Good News to the poor, then they have no Good News. The Good News does not exist outside of you, the Good News *is* you and all those others who have chosen to follow Jesus.

## **The Trinity**

I might just tell a story here about the Trinity; if you have heard it before, my apologies.

The Trinity looked down at the world, at all the suffering and pain of so many people, and decided they had to do something about it. So the three persons got together to discuss what

to do. They agreed that they would send the Second Person of the Trinity down to earth to show people how to live together.

Now word of this leaked out to the angels. They were horrified at the thought. So they send a delegation to the Trinity to try to dissuade them from this course of action. 'You must be mad,' they said to the Trinity, 'wanting to send the Second Person down there. They'll crucify him.'

And so it came to pass. After the resurrection of Jesus and he returned to Heaven, the angels all crowded around him to hear what he had done and what had happened to him. So he told them everything that happened. When he had finished, one of the angels asked him: "And what did you leave behind to ensure that your mission would continue and be completed, now that you have returned home." Jesus said: "I left behind a few men and women who loved me."

And the angels shook their heads and looked at one another in disbelief. Then they looked at Jesus in disbelief. And one of them said: "You mean, that's it!" Jesus said: "That's it."

So, you and I, we're it! If we fail, there's no plan B.

We are all called, as Christians, to live this life of radical love and you, particularly, by your calling as Marists. Unless we live it, we cannot authentically call others to live it. And hence we cannot preach the Gospel; we cannot fulfil the ministry we have been given.

And so, for meditation, I would suggest any of the passages which I have used in this talk. Perhaps, Matthew 14, the feeding of the five thousand.

*"When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go*

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*into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children." (Matthew 14 v 14-21)*

## *Values of Kingdom*

*"Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (John 18 v 33-37)*

Jesus' Kingdom is not *of* this world. We have traditionally understood this to mean that Jesus' Kingdom is of *another* world, it is to be found in Heaven. But I have suggested that the Kingdom Jesus was referring to is very much *in* this world. But it is utterly different to any other kingdom in this world. This was to be a Kingdom or community of radically different economic, social and political relationships, and totally different values to other Kingdoms. It was *in* this world, but not *of* this world, it was a light for the rest of the world to see.

### **Social Relationships**

In the last talk, I discussed the economic and social relationships which were to characterise the Kingdom of God – a community which shared everything they had and welcomed the outcast and rejected. It was to be a community of radical equality:

*At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child,*

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*whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18 v 1-5)*

We have often understood this passage to refer to the *innocence* of children – unless we become innocent like a child we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But I think it refers, rather, to the *insignificance* of children in the society of his time: a child had no achievements to underline their importance, and therefore a child was of little significance. We have to abandon all pretence at our own importance and relinquish any ideas of our exalted status, if we wish to live in the community or Kingdom of God.

Again, Jesus tells the early Christian community:

*"But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called leaders, for you have only one leader, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Matt 23 v 8-12)*

Everyone in this community was equal – except one, the founder and leader of the community, the Risen Jesus, Son of God. Jesus is Lord and there is no other; Jesus is teacher and there is no other; Jesus is priest, mediator between God and human beings, and there is no other.

So unlike the world around them, there was no hierarchy of status within the community. There are roles within the community, some are apostles, some are teachers, some are prophets, but there is no hierarchy.

*"Many who are first shall be last and the last shall be first." (Mark 19 v 30)*



Peter Mc Verry s.j.

This is not about being humble! Relationships within the Kingdom of God are totally unlike – indeed even contrary to – relationships within the wider society.

### **Political Relationships**

It was also a community with totally different political relationships.

The request of the mother of Zebedee to give her sons a position of power in the Kingdom of God failed completely to understand the nature of the Kingdom that Jesus was inaugurating.<sup>24</sup>

*"Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."*

*When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you." (Matt 20 v 20-28)*

The Community of God was to be a community of brothers and sisters, free of all domination.

*"It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes*

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24. *"Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."*

*When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt 20 v 20-28)*

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*to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt 20 v 26-28)*

### **A Community of Radical Non-violence**

It was to be a community of radical non-violence. The early Christian community believed that the way of Jesus was a way of non-violence.

Imagine yourself as a member of the early Christian community hearing this passage from Mark's Gospel at the Sunday Assembly:

*"Then they came forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. And suddenly, one of the followers of Jesus grasped his sword and drew it; he struck the high priest's servant and cut off his ear. Jesus then said, 'Put your sword back, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, who would promptly send more than twelve legions of angels to my defence?'" (Mark 26 v 50-53)*

Why did Mark mention this detail? Perhaps to emphasise that the way of Jesus is a way of non-violence. The young male members of the early Church refused to serve in the Roman army, even though they were obliged by law to do so. They suffered arrest, persecution and even death, for their refusal was interpreted by the authorities as subversive – it was seen as a declaration of opposition to Caesar. But they persisted, as they believed it was the way of Jesus, their leader.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem, seated on a donkey. What was that all about? Some commentators suggest that Jesus had sprained his ankle!

Jesus was on his way up to Jerusalem for the most important feast of the Jewish year, the Passover. The Passover Feast celebrated the liberation of Israel from their Egyptian oppressors.

During this week, thousands of Jews made the pilgrimage up to the Temple in Jerusalem. Inevitably among them were some who wished to see the liberation of Israel from their Roman oppressors and were prepared to use violence to achieve it. It was a dangerous time for the political authorities. Hence, during this week, the Romans increased their army presence in Jerusalem, drafting in soldiers from outlying barracks.

On the Sunday before the feast – which as Christians we celebrate as Palm Sunday – the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, rode into Jerusalem, seated on his magnificent horse, along with a large garrison of cavalry and foot soldiers. People would have come out to witness the pageantry of it. Thousands of soldiers with weapons, gold eagles mounted on poles, the beating of drums. This procession of the Roman Governor and his soldiers, this display of force, was intended to deter any would-be freedom fighters. This procession was not just the symbol of a political system that created and maintained poverty, enormous inequality and oppression but it was the very means by which this system maintained itself.

On this same day, Palm Sunday, at the same time, Jesus also entered Jerusalem, but from the other side of the city, seated on a donkey. This was not a coincidence: this procession was planned in advance and carefully thought out.<sup>25</sup>

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25. *“When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”*

*This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.*

*A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” (Matt 21 v 1-11)*

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*“Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’”*

This was a deliberate prophetic act on Jesus' part, intended to contrast with the procession of Pontius Pilate. Matthew tells us the meaning of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in this way. He quotes the prophet Zechariah:

*“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”(Zechariah 9 v 9)*

The community for whom Matthew was writing was a community of Christians who had converted from Judaism. Matthew would have presumed that they were familiar with the Old Testament texts and therefore with the meaning of the text which he had just quoted. The meaning of the text was in the next verse from Zechariah:

*“He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.” (Zechariah 9 v 10)*

The reign of Jesus was to be a reign of peace which would banish chariots, war horses and battle bows; this reign would be from sea to sea, to the ends of the earth. It would abolish the reign of Caesar and every other reign where injustice, oppression and war existed. Jesus intended his procession – which today we would call a “counter-demonstration” – to contrast the two reigns, the reign of God or the reign of Caesar, two very different visions of life on earth.

I think that today, the uprisings in the Middle East can help us to understand the non-violence of the early Christian community. There we witness uprisings against kings who never had a mandate from their people to rule over them and who, every night on our television screens, we witness how they maintain their power by military violence. So too the Romans had conquered Galilee by violence and maintained their control of Galilee by force of arms. Jesus was declaring that the Kingdom he proclaimed was not that sort of Kingdom, indeed quite the opposite.

### **The Values of a Consumer Economy v The Values of the Kingdom of God**

Today, in our world, the global, capitalist, economy is dominant. An economic model is not value-less; it must actually promote certain values in order to succeed. Some of the values promoted by this global economy are in direct conflict with the values of the Gospel. I would identify three core values of this economy in which we are all immersed and contrast them with the values of the Kingdom.

#### *a) Fulfilment as consumption*

The first, and most fundamental, value is the idea that our fulfilment is to be found in purchasing and consuming goods and services. Consumerism is the blood that flows through the veins of the global capitalist economy to keep it alive. To keep the economy going, everyone must be persuaded to buy more and more, and more and more often. Otherwise, as in the current recession when people who have surplus money are saving rather than spending, economic growth falters and ultimately could collapse. But as our real needs are limited, what we are persuaded to purchase and consume has less and less relationship to what we actually need. Hence a consumer-led economic model has to convince us to *want* more and more, by persuading us that our fulfilment and happiness lie in consuming goods and services, in having bigger houses, faster cars, louder hi-fis, the latest gadgets, more foreign holidays. It must furthermore seek to

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promote the belief that our value and status is dependent on our ability and willingness to purchase more, and bigger and newer.

I remember when I was growing up, there were only two types of television: a small 14 inch one, and a huge 17 inch one, black and white televisions of course. Having a 17 inch television was a sign of wealth and status – ordinary people only had 14 inch televisions. I went on holidays to England and there I saw colour television for the first time. After that, I could no longer enjoy black and white televisions and I couldn't wait till our family got a colour one. Then we had to get larger televisions, the bigger the television the wealthier and more important you were. Then it was flat screen televisions, then High Definition televisions and soon everyone will have to have 3D televisions. And after a while, we will wonder how we ever lived without 3D.

The irony is, therefore, that having persuaded us to purchase goods and services in the pursuit of happiness, it is necessary that we become, fairly quickly, *dissatisfied* with what we have just purchased so that we are driven to go out and purchase yet again. That contradiction helps to create the spiritual vacuum that exists in many people's lives today – a vacuum that they are encouraged to fill by yet further consumption! In the pursuit of happiness, we are running up an escalator that is travelling in the opposite direction, in the unachievable aim of arriving at the top.

“More is better” is the mantra of such an economic model, with its variations such as “bigger is better” or “newer is better”. It must, therefore, persuade us that our needs can be fulfilled *independently* of other people. Indeed to ensure continued satisfaction and fulfilment in our lives, we must protect our consumer goods from other people, we must keep them out, or at least, we must control whom we let in – otherwise our fulfilment may be jeopardized. We must become independent of others. Other people may threaten our happiness.

### *The Christian Vision*

In the Christian vision, our fulfilment and happiness are to be found, not in *getting*, but in *giving*.

Peter Mc Verry s.j.

*“And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12 v 15)*

It is in giving life and love to others that we find fulfilment. Every parent knows that: it is giving their love to their children that they find the greatest happiness. Every teenager, intensely in love, wrapped in the arms of their boyfriend or girlfriend, wishes that that moment of intense love might never end. They would not swap that moment for all the money in the world. Our happiest moments in life are in loving and being loved. In the Christian vision, what we have is not our own. It is given to us to be used for the good of others. The satisfaction we get from buying a new car, or acquiring a new toy soon fades, and cannot compare with the satisfaction we get from meeting the needs of others – be it our children, our families, our friends, our neighbours or strangers we have never met. In the Christian vision, it is in giving love to others that we find our happiness and fulfilment. Other people are the source of our happiness.

*b) Security in economic assets*

Secondly, to ensure the continued expansion of the economic system we must be persuaded *that our security is to be found in what we possess*. We have to work hard, within the system, in order to obtain more so that we can cushion ourselves and our families from the uncertainties of the future. Purchasing our own home, building up our bank balance, expanding our share holdings are essential to escape from the insecurity which the future threatens us with. They are essential, above all, for the security of our children.

This is of course patently untrue. The collapse in the property market in Ireland saw many families, who lived very comfortable lives, plunged into poverty and even homelessness; the increase in interest rates is putting many families in Ireland, who lived very comfortable lives, into a debt situation from which they may not be able to escape. Yet, while we may realize that

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our accumulated assets are a very tenuous form of security, we are persuaded that there is nothing else that is more secure. The vacuum in many people's lives, already deepened by consumerism, is further deepened by the belief imposed on us that the primary objective in life is to accumulate as much as we can in the search for security.

### *The Christian Vision*

Where does the Gospel tell us that our security is to be found?

Security must be based on something that is unchanging and unchangeable. Otherwise it is not secure, it is built on sand. It can never, therefore, be based on economic assets. The only thing that is unchanging and unchangeable is the infinite and unconditional love of God. Our security, then, can be founded only on the knowledge that we are loved infinitely and unconditionally by God.<sup>26</sup>

And how is that love mediated to us?

The love of God for us is mediated through the love of others for us, through community. Hence in the Christian vision, our true security is to be found only in community. It is in the solidarity with each other in community, in the relationships which we build with each other in community, that we find both fulfilment and security. Our security is to be found in the knowledge that there are those who love us, who will be in solidarity with us in good times and in bad. In community, we will, in good times, share with those who have little, while, in bad times, others will share with us. Our security is to be found in building commu-

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26. *"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."* (1 John 4 v 7-12)



nity, not bank balances – the wealth we create is for sharing, not for hoarding.<sup>27</sup>

“Letting go” is the spirituality that meets the essence of our existence as human beings, destined to grow old and die. Letting go of possessions, of status, of power and above all of our securities. All the gifts that God has given to each of us have to be given back. We come into the world with nothing, we leave the world with nothing. In that journey, we give back to God the gift of parents, the gift of health, the gift of material possessions, and ultimately the gift of life itself. The only gift we have been given that we get to keep forever, the only gift we do not have to return to God, is the gift of the infinite and unconditional love of God.

Our letting go, our giving back to God what God has already given to us is also mediated through community. God does not need us or anything we have – but others do. The gifts that God has given to us we give back to God, through the community, by giving them back to the community. It is in giving to others what we possess, our goods, our time, our talents, our skills and, as the Cross symbolises, giving ourselves, that we find fulfilment. Our solidarity with others impels us to share and to share radically. In that sharing, we find both fulfilment and security.<sup>28</sup>

As an individual, I cannot live the Gospel spirituality of letting go, except in community. As an individual, I can of course live a simple lifestyle, I can refuse to join the headlong rush to acquire more and bigger and better; I can be satisfied with having my basic needs met; I can reject the dominant values of the consumer society. But in living simply, no matter how good and

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27. “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.” (James 2 v 14-18)

28. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3 v 17)

## *Values of Kingdom*

valuable that is, I am not fundamentally challenging the values of this society. I am going in the same direction, only more slowly.

The spirituality of “letting go” can only be lived in community, in solidarity with others. We, as community, can express our radical solidarity with each other through sharing what we have and who we are, and in that sharing present a value that is in contradiction to the values presented by our culture

### *c) Individualism*

And so the third value of the capitalist system is an excessive *individualism*. The system promotes, encourages and rewards individual effort. The individual is the source of the innovation which drives capitalism, and the individual is the beneficiary of the rewards of capitalism. *My* security therefore is to be founded on the economic assets which I, *as an individual*, can accumulate. As the goods and services of this world are limited, then the struggle to find security in economic assets, *as individuals*, pushes us into a competitive struggle with other human beings, who become, not the source of the fulfilment of our needs, but a threat to that fulfilment. The sense of individualism weakens the bonds that bind us together and seeks to deny the centrality of relationships to a fulfilled life. Community becomes an option extra, for those who feel so inclined.

Margaret Thatcher’s famous saying: “There is no such thing as society”, meaning society is only an accumulation of individuals, is the logical consequence of such a model.

### *The Christian Vision*

In the Christian vision, we are not isolated individuals but we exist in solidarity with all other human beings. Promoting solidarity is the antidote to excessive individualism.

The values of the Kingdom, then, are counter-cultural. Those values require quite different economic, social and political relationships between us. As Christians, we are subversives, undermining the values and way of relating which exist in the

society around us. That wider society should be puzzled by our lives, it should find it difficult to understand us. The early Church was certainly counter-cultural: their love for each other, their solidarity with each other, their respectfulness towards the rejected and unwanted, their commitment to non-violence, made them stand out from the crowd, so much so that they were persecuted.

What makes the Church stand out today from our society? Most people would perhaps say: sex! That it was the Church's position on sexual issues, such as divorce, abortion, gay relationships, contraception, condoms. The Gospels actually talk very little about sex, but have a lot to say about money and power; the Church says very little about money and power, but has a lot to say about sex!

If we live, as Christians, comfortably inserted into the society around us, then we need to ask serious questions about our spirituality. We have to ask ourselves have we absorbed the values and ways of relating to each other from the culture around us, instead of being “*a light to the world,*” a challenge to those values and those ways of relating. We have to examine our lifestyles, our attitudes, our commitment to the challenge of the Gospel.

Perhaps then, for a scripture passage to reflect upon, I might choose John's Gospel:

*“If the world hates you, you must realise that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you do not belong to the world, because my choice of you has drawn you out of the world, that is why the world hates you. Remember the words I said to you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too; if they kept my word, they will keep yours as well. But it will be on my account that they will do all this to you, because they do not know the one who sent me. If I had not come, if I had not spoken to them, they would have been blameless; but as it is*

## Values of Kingdom

*they have no excuse for their sin. Anyone who hates me hates my Father. If I had not performed such works among them as no one else has ever done, they would be blameless; but as it is, in spite of what they have seen, they hate both me and my Father. But all this was only to fulfil the words written in their Law: They hated me without reason. When the Paraclete comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who issues from the Father, he will be my witness. And you too will be witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.” (John 15 v 18-27)*

## *Eucharist as Liberation by the Poor*

All communities celebrate special moments in the life of that community. They have celebrations when new members join the community; they celebrate events that they consider significant for the community; they celebrate the appointment or election of leaders to the community.

The Christian community is no different: it too is a community of people who live their lives in unity with each other, and who celebrate those moments of special importance in the life of their community.

The primary significance of all the sacraments lies in community.

- The Sacrament of Baptism is the celebration of the community at the entry into their midst of a new member.
- The Sacrament of Confirmation is the celebration of the community at one of their members becoming full members of the community through receiving the Holy Spirit.
- The Sacrament of Marriage is the celebration of the community at the commitment in love of one (or both) of their members to each other.
- The Sacrament of the Sick is the prayer of the community for healing or a happy death of one of their community.
- The Sacrament of Holy Orders is the anointing of one of the community to be a leader of that community.
- The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the celebration of the community at the reconciliation with the community of someone who has offended against the community.
- The Sacrament of the Eucharist is the celebration of the community of the death and resurrection of Jesus which brought them together; and their commitment to love one another as Jesus loved them.

## *Eucharist as Liberation by the Poor*

If there is no community, then the primary significance of the sacraments is lost; we have to find, indeed invent, an alternative significance. Today, with the weakening of the bonds within community, or sometimes the almost total breakdown or absence of community, the sacraments have come to be understood primarily as channels of grace to *individuals*. Undoubtedly they are, but this is not their primary significance. In the absence of a living community, the sacraments have become, for many Christians, social occasions, events dictated by social convention, rituals to be undergone, frequently boring and irrelevant to their 'real' lives. The Church is often seen as a "service provider", offering baptisms, First Communions, confirmations, marriages, funerals to those who desire them. The Eucharist may become "a Sunday duty"; the "sign of peace", where we reach out to our neighbour, an unwelcome intrusion into one's personal time with God.

This community, a community of solidarity and openness, is not a left-wing social experiment. We do not lay down our lives for an ideology! What distinguishes this community from all others is the belief of the community in the Resurrection of Jesus, the commitment of each member of the community to the founder and leader of the community, Jesus, who is alive and risen. This belief and commitment is celebrated primarily in the Eucharist. The early Christian community understood that their coming together to celebrate the Eucharist was an integral part of their life together as community, it was at the centre of community.

Sometimes when I am saying Mass where I live in Ballymun, and I look down at the tiny congregation who are scattered here and there amongst the pews, who sit passively for almost all of the Mass, I sometimes ask myself: "What on earth am I doing here?"

Indeed my conscience began to trouble me because I found so little spiritual nourishment in this fundamental expression of Christian commitment and so little enthusiasm for this extraordinary act of worship of God made present on the altar. I began to wonder did I have any real faith at all. I felt a tension within me,

between loyalty to the institution, which was telling me that the Eucharist *should* be at the centre of my spiritual life and faith, and loyalty to my own self which was telling me that this ritual, which I was performing every day, actually had very little meaning for me, a tension between conformity to the institution as a priest and my own authenticity as a human being.

I want to share with you how I came to find new meaning in the celebration of the Eucharist and a new enthusiasm for the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is at the very centre of the Christian community's life and it is the most significant act in the ministry of the priest. How we understand Eucharist then is intrinsically related to how we understand the Church and, therefore, how we understand priesthood. The Eucharist is also at the centre of many people's spirituality and it is their primary way of worshipping God. Hence the Eucharist is also closely related to how we understand spirituality and how we understand religion. Finding a new understanding of the Eucharist involved, then, for me finding also a new understanding of Church, priesthood, spirituality and religion.

Again, let me say that I am not a theologian, nor a scripture scholar, nor an expert on Eucharist or Church history, so feel very free to criticise or dismiss anything I might say.

*“Do this in memory of me”*

Celebrating the Eucharist is, of course, to carry out the command of the Lord to “do this in memory of me.” But what did Jesus mean by “*this*”? I think there are two very different understandings of what we mean by “*this*”; the first meaning had dominated our spirituality for the past 1700 years, but the second meaning is, I believe, closer to Jesus' vision than the first.

*The First understanding of “this”*

For the first three hundred years of the Church's life, the Eucharist was celebrated in people's homes, often in secret, for

## *Eucharist as Liberation by the Poor*

fear of persecution. The early Christians understood that their coming together to share the Eucharist was a fundamental expression of their faith in the Risen Jesus. And so they continued to meet together despite the danger. What did it mean for them? I will come to that later. That is the second meaning of “Do this”.

It was, it seems to me, the combination of the Arian heresy and the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire by the Emperor Constantine that began to shape our current understanding of the Eucharist, an understanding which, though of course perfectly valid and theologically correct, no longer meets the needs of many of today’s Christians.

The Arian heresy denied that Jesus was truly divine. This led to an emphasis by the Church on the divinity of Jesus. Acknowledging Jesus as God became the defining characteristic of Christian identity. The Church came to understand its role as promoting the worship of Jesus as God, and the celebration of the Eucharist then became predominantly an act of worship.

We see the impact of that today in the spirituality of many Christians; benediction and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament became an important element in the spiritual life of Catholics, attendance at Sunday Mass became the hallmark of a committed Christian, evidence of their belonging to the Church, and receiving Holy Communion was only legitimate for those who were in the state of grace and therefore worthy to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Reverence for the divinity, present in the bread and wine, required the faithful to fast from midnight before receiving communion. After the consecration, the priest raises the host and the chalice to allow the congregation to worship God, now present in the bread and wine.

Since the Eucharist had become primarily an act of worship of God in Jesus, how the Eucharist was celebrated was strictly controlled by Rome – in Churches around the world, in Africa, Europe, Latin America, Asia exactly the same ritual was enacted, in a language that people did not understand, the priest with his back to the people, wearing exactly the same vestments, the chalices lined with gold to defined specifications, the wine had to have a specific alcoholic content, the priest extended or joined his hands at exactly the same places in the rubric, in every town and



village around the globe – all to ensure that the respect due to the celebration of this divine sacrament would be preserved.

Vatican II came along and introduced some relatively minor variations: The Mass was now said in the vernacular, the priest actually looked at the people while saying Mass, communion could be received in the hand instead of on the tongue, you now only had to fast for one hour before communion instead of fasting from midnight, changes which were fiercely resisted by many, both priests and laity, who believed that these changes diminished the reverence due to the Divine Presence in the Eucharist. I can remember priests who refused to give communion in the hand, and there are some, priests and laity, who wish to go back to the sacred character of the Latin Mass, which they believe has been lost in present-day liturgies.

The other historical event that shaped our current understanding of Eucharist, as adoration of God in Jesus made present in the Eucharist, was the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Churches were built in cities and towns throughout the Empire and the Eucharist came to be celebrated no longer in secrecy in the homes of Christians, but God was to be worshipped in the public space. As befitting the majesty of God, Churches became more ornate, magnificent cathedrals were built as monuments to the glory of God, and the Eucharist was celebrated with music and incense. Gregorian chant was considered to be the music that most appropriately fitted the celebration of the divinity that was revealed in Jesus. Westlife or U2 have no place in such a sacred celebration.

Outside the walls of the Churches, wars were being fought, revolutions were being waged, feudal society gave way to the industrial revolution, kings were being toppled, democracies were being born. But inside the walls, the same Mass was celebrated in exactly the same way, oblivious to what was going on outside. The Eucharist was an act of worship, of adoration, which had little or nothing to do with the turmoil that was going on outside the walls; it was for people a means of personal sanctification, sanctity understood as “other worldly”. The focus is firmly on heaven, and on the grace which we need to get there, which is dispensed through the Mass and the sacraments.

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In this understanding of the Eucharist, the clergy become very important – so, not surprisingly, we, the clergy, encouraged it for all we could! We are the only ones who can celebrate the Eucharist, we become therefore the channel of God’s grace, the intermediaries between human beings and God. We play a vital role in peoples’ spiritual lives. We wear special clothes, we take vows of celibacy, to set us apart from the laity.

So we priests, a people set apart, celebrate a ritual, understood primarily as a way of expressing our belief in the divinity of Jesus, and the Church seeks to ensure that this ritual is celebrated in a proper way befitting the majesty and glory of God.

### *The Second understanding of “this”*

I would suggest a different understanding of the Eucharist, one that I believe is closer to what Jesus actually intended, one that the early Christians understood, and one that is so relevant, so challenging, to the actual daily lives of Christians that perhaps that is the reason why we are so reluctant to adopt it.

The traditional theological understanding of the Eucharist is that by repeating the words of Jesus, “This is my body, this is my blood”, Christ becomes present in the bread and wine, and in faith we acknowledge his presence there and worship him.

However, my problem is: if this is what Jesus meant by “Do *this* in memory of me”, I wonder why did Jesus not perform this ritual with his disciples on many occasions. Why did Jesus not frequently, perhaps even daily, gather his disciples around him, take bread and wine into his hands and say “This is my body; this is my blood”, and pass it around to them, thereby reinforcing what he was asking them to do after his death, in remembrance of him?

The answer, of course, is that what we are remembering, re-enacting, in the celebration of the Eucharist is the death of the Lord; and Jesus could only die once. At the Last Supper, Jesus did not say

*“This is my body, this is my blood”;*

and invite the disciples to *worship* him.

No, Jesus said:

*“This is my body, which will be given up for you; this is my blood, which will be poured out for you.”*

And he invited the disciples to *follow* him.

In the Eucharist then, we are recalling the act of self-sacrifice in which Jesus gave up everything that was most precious to him, namely life itself, for the sake of us, his brothers and sisters and we commit ourselves to doing the same for our brothers and sisters. The Eucharist is the invitation *“to proclaim the death of the Lord.”* (1 Corinthians 11 v 26). *Attending Mass is, then, a call to radical living.* The early Christians left Mass, not so much feeling that they had done their duty, but renewed in their commitment to go out to do their duty.

Going to communion is not just receiving the body and blood of Jesus; it is also a statement of radical intent: that in uniting ourselves with Jesus, we commit ourselves to imitating his self-sacrifice in all its radicality.

We go to Mass then, first to remember: to remember how this community, to which we belong, came into being, namely, through the total self-sacrifice of our leader, Jesus. And in uniting ourselves, in communion, with Jesus in his self-sacrifice, we commit ourselves to going out and doing the same.

In this understanding of Eucharist, then, we come to Mass, not so much to adore Jesus as God, but to renew our commitment to following him, our risen leader, in his self-giving. Our spirituality is firmly focused not on Heaven, but on earth, not on ourselves and saving our souls, but on others and their needs.

In understanding the Eucharist as an act of adoration of God in Jesus, isn't it wonderful to see the millionaire and the pauper coming together to attend Mass. Each person, rich or poor, of high status or low status, is equally welcome to worship God

## *Eucharist as Liberation by the Poor*

during this sacred hour and each receives the grace of the sacrament, regardless of their status or circumstances.

However, in understanding the Eucharist as a commitment to following our risen Leader in a radical self-giving for the sake of our brothers and sisters, then there is a total contradiction in the millionaire and the pauper sitting side by side at Mass, week after week after week. Attending the Eucharist can become a ritual that comforts and reassures us but that has lost its meaning.

Perhaps the declining numbers of people attending Mass today in Europe is a wake-up call for the Church. Perhaps those who are staying away are the prophets for today's Church who are trying to tell us something about our life as Church, that something fundamental is missing from our life, and like the prophets of old, the Church dismisses them and prays that they will realise their errors and return to the true faith.

Hence, how we understand the Eucharist depends on how we understand Church, and vice versa. The Church can often appear to be a loose grouping of people who share similar beliefs; the Church provides certain services, such as baptisms, confirmations, and a weekly Eucharist, which affirm the faith of those individuals. But apart from those occasional services, life together as community is very peripheral, even non-existent.

Or the Church is essentially a community of people who live together in love, united by their faith in Jesus. Their faith in Jesus can only be expressed by living in community. The Church, then, is understood to be a Church of service, rather than a Church of services.

### *The Washing of the Feet*

As you know, John's Gospel has no record of the Last Supper, unlike the other three evangelists. Yet the Eucharist is central to John's Gospel and is full of references to the body and blood of Jesus. Instead, John tells the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. This story is John's attempt to explain the meaning of the Last Supper. As salvation comes to us from the death and resurrection of Jesus which we celebrate in the

Eucharist, so for John that means that salvation comes to us through our reaching out to one another.

Where does salvation come from? In our ministry, we are seeking to bring people closer to God, to find God, to find salvation. How do we measure the success of our ministry? (I will come back to that in the next talk). There is a strong tendency to measure our success by how full our Churches are – getting people *back* to Church, getting people *into* Church, getting people to return to the sacraments: we put on Novenas, we have attractive singing at Mass, we put on special Masses for children and young people, and so on. Now, don't get me wrong, that is wonderful. But it is *not* the criterion for a successful ministry.

If you are trying to bring people closer to God, then we have to know where God is to be found; otherwise, we may be sending them down the wrong path! I have talked a lot about where God is to be found: God is to be found in the poor and the suffering. But Jesus' insistence that we search for God amongst the poor, the outcast and the suffering was completely unacceptable to that tradition. It was not just a theological debate between Jesus and the religious authorities – it cut to the very core of the Jewish faith.

### *God is present only in the Temple*

In that tradition, God was only to be found in *one* place and one place only: in the Holy of Holies, in the midst of the temple in Jerusalem.

When the Jewish nation was wandering through the desert, God accompanied them, present in the Ark of the Covenant. It was more or less a tent on wheels, a 'wanderly wagon', but that was God's home where one could go to find God.

But when the chosen people settled down in the territory given them by God and they built houses for themselves in which to live, they also built a house for God. That house, the house of God, was known as the Temple and it was located in Jerusalem.

## *Eucharist as Liberation by the Poor*

The Temple was the very centre of the Jewish faith. To be in the Temple was to be in God's presence in a very special way.

On feast days, Jewish pilgrims made their way up to Jerusalem, to the Temple, with great rejoicing

*"I was glad when they said to me,  
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"  
Our feet are standing  
within your gates, O Jerusalem". (Psalm 122 v 1-2)*

*"Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves." (John 11 v 55)*

### *Architecture of Temple - Holiness as separation from sinners*

In the centre of that Temple was the Holy of Holies, that place where God resided. No-one could enter the Holy of Holies except the High Priest, and then only on one day of the year, the day of Atonement. Present in the Holy of Holies, God was separated from God's people. Jewish theology understood God's holiness to consist in God's separation from all that is not holy. God was holy and therefore could not associate with sin or sinners or the impure. So God was isolated in the Holy of Holies, kept apart, protected from all that is not holy, including us human beings.

Around the Holy of Holies was an area where only the priests could enter – they were the holiest of the people and therefore the closest to God.

Outside the Priestly area, there was another area where the Jewish people were permitted to enter, Jewish men in one courtyard, Jewish women in another. They were forbidden to enter the area reserved for the priests.

And outside the area permitted to the Jewish people, furthest from God, there was an area which was open to the Gentiles, the least holy of all. They were forbidden to enter the area reserved for Jews.

Hence the architecture of the Temple reflected varying degrees of holiness: Holiness consisted in separation from all that was less holy.

*Holiness as proximity to sinners*

But Jesus announced a God who was not separated from God's people. Far from it, God was to be found there in the sick, the poor, the blind, the lame, the man robbed and beaten. God *identified* with the people. For Jesus, holiness consists not in separation from sinners but in proximity to sinners.

How can one explain how upsetting this was for the religious authorities? For them, the temple was where you found God. Since the priests were in that area closest to God, if people wished to approach God, they had to do so through the priests. Access to God was through the priests and only through the priests.

But Jesus declared that the people could find God, in their midst, in the poor and the suffering. They had no need to go to the Temple, or go through the priests. "Sacred space", where God is to be found, is not in the Temple but in the streets, the marketplace, in peoples' homes. "Sacred space" is the table around which you share a meal in fellowship, welcome and respect for the poor, the sinner, the infirm – and in that "sacred space" you find God.

For the religious authorities, this was blasphemy: an insult to God, a rejection of the God who resided in the Temple.

*Jesus distances himself from the Temple*

There is an interesting movement in Luke's Gospel. Luke's Gospel describes the changing relationship of Jesus to the Temple. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is *identified* with the Temple:

- the good news was first proclaimed *in the Temple* to Zechariah;
- when Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary brought him *to the Temple* for the ceremony of purification;

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- Jesus, as an infant, was first recognised as the Saviour *in the Temple* by Simeon and Anna, two people who spent their days in the Temple;
- when Jesus disappeared at twelve years of age, his parents found him *in the Temple*. Mary said to Jesus: “My son, my son, why have you done this to us?” Now, if your son had gone missing for three days, would you say to him: “my son, my son, why have you done this to us”? I suspect that what Mary actually said to Jesus was unprintable, and so Luke gives us a very edited version of the conversation!

So the story of Jesus begins with a very positive relationship between Jesus and the Temple.

But Luke’s gospel ends very differently – Jesus in confrontation with the Temple:

- Jesus drives out the buyers and sellers from the Temple
- he criticises the Temple authorities
- he is arrested by the Temple police
- he is tried by the Temple priests
- he is handed over by the Temple authorities to be executed

*“Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” (Mark 11 v 15-17).*

In casting out the buyers and sellers from the Temple, Jesus tells us why he does it. “*You have made it (the Temple) a den of robbers*”. Here Jesus is associating himself with the criticism of the prophet Jeremiah, who warns the religious leaders of his time



that putting their faith in the Temple when they are failing to do justice, is to deceive themselves.

*“Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another,*

*If you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.*

*Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail.*

*Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!" – only to go on doing all these abominations?*

*Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?*

*You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 7 v 4-11)*

In this dramatic act, Jesus identifies with that prophetic understanding of God.

Jesus is subsequently arrested by the Temple police, tried and convicted by the Temple priests and handed over by the Temple authorities to be executed.

Even at the beginning of his public ministry, we find Jesus distancing himself from the Temple. To be forgiven your sins, you had to go to the Temple and purchase an animal to be sacrificed by the priests in atonement for your sins. (The priests usually grew very fat!). The bigger your sin, the more expensive the animal. This all took place in the public area, open to all to see. So if you noticed your uncle Percy buying a camel, you could guess what sin he had committed! But at the beginning of

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Jesus' public ministry, where were people going to have their sins forgiven? Not to the Temple, to the priests. But into the desert, to a layman. And Jesus, by going to be baptised by John in the Jordan, affirmed the choice they people were making.

*“John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”* (Mark 1 v 4-5)

The story of Jesus is a story of a religious leader who came to dissociate himself from the Temple; in its place, he associated with the enemies of the Temple, sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes: he ate with them and joined with them in fellowship and welcome. He declared that God was amongst them, not in the Temple. Not surprisingly, therefore, he was rejected by the Temple, in the name of God.

The early Christian Community understood that Jesus had rejected the Temple. At the moment of his death, Matthew, using symbolic images, describes the curtain of the Temple, which separated God in the Holy of Holies from all those who were outside, as being torn in two. Jesus' death was the final act in breaking down the separation of God from the people.

*“At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”* (Matt 27 v 51)

We often measure fidelity to the Church by Church attendance. Surveys regularly tell us what percentage of people attend Mass, and the reducing numbers are often understood to be an indicator of the drift towards a more Godless society. The Christian community has been focused on the Church building, and organised around the activities that take place there. Going to that building, and taking part in the activities there, is often understood to be hallmark of the good Christian. The Church

building is seen as “sacred space”, to which you go to encounter God, leaving the world and all its cares outside.

Have we, the Christian community, chosen to locate God back into our Churches – the new Temple, the new Holy of Holies – and once again surrounded God with priests? Today, as in the time of Jesus, sacred space is safely separated from those who make us uncomfortable, the poor, the unwanted, the despised. Today, as in the time of Jesus, we access God through the priests, not the poor. Today, as in the time of Jesus, we go to worship God through the priests and we go to find forgiveness for our sins through the priests. We have removed God from our streets, our prisons, from our hostels and our drug clinics, from trailers at the side of the road – and locked God safely up in our tabernacles. We can, then, oppose the opening of a service for homeless people or drug users on our street, or object to social housing in our neighbourhood, and go to church on Sunday to find God.

In today’s world, some are searching for God but they are not going to the Church. They are bypassing the priests. Many have a strong concern for justice. They are going to South Africa to build houses for the poor; they are going as volunteers to work with Concern and Goal and other agencies. Many schools have a social immersion programme, where students spend some weeks or months amongst the poor, at home or abroad, which is a life-changing experience for some of them. Maybe they are finding God in the wilderness, where the poor and the outcast live.

“*Salvation comes to us through the poor*” is a concept which is central to liberation theology. I think John is trying to express this through his story of the washing of the feet. The Eucharist is Jesus’ gift to us, his followers. The Eucharist is intrinsically related to God’s gift of the poor to us.

Since God is love, then we grow into the image and likeness of God by growing in love. Those who are unwanted, excluded, rejected, and poor offer us, in their need, a great gift, in fact the greatest gift of all. They invite us to open our hearts to include them in our love. If we expand the love in our hearts to include

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them, we become more loving persons, and so we become more fully human, and therefore more fully divine. No greater gift than that can anyone offer us. The poor bring God's love to us. Indeed, salvation comes to us only from the poor.

If we fail to reach out to those who are poor and on the margins, we fail not only them, but we fail ourselves, for we reject their invitation to grow in love. In rejecting this invitation, we show ourselves to be not yet ready for the Kingdom of God.

And so, in our reaching out to the poor and rejected, we offer them the gift of our care and love. But they offer us an even greater gift, the gift of becoming more like God.

Accepting the invitation of the poor and marginalised, and so find salvation, is not an invitation to be charitable; it is an invitation to be just. A world where some are poor and marginalised is an unjust world, a contradiction to the world desired by God. It cannot be, or become, the Kingdom of God while that injustice remains. Imagine a community where everyone's needs are met, where everyone is valued and respected, that surely is the Kingdom of God on earth. It is in our efforts to build a more just world that we enter the Kingdom of God.

And so why do we want to get people into our Churches? The goal is to enable them to re-affirm their commitment to finding God's salvation through the poor. Why do I come to the Eucharist, why do I spend time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament? To re-affirm my commitment to finding God in the poor and the suffering. If my time in prayer does not make me more committed to the poor and to building a more just world in which the suffering of the poor is eliminated, then I am wasting my time in prayer. Salvation comes to us only through the poor.

And so, for our prayer today, we might take one or both passages from the Gospel, the death of Jesus and the washing of the feet. These two passages complement each other, each focuses us back to the other. Let us just stay with them, in quiet prayer, before the Blessed Sacrament, open to the Spirit:

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*“When they reached the place called The Skull, there they crucified him and the two criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.' Then they cast lots to share out his clothing. The people stayed there watching. As for the leaders, they jeered at him with the words, 'He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.'*

*The soldiers mocked him too, coming up to him, offering him vinegar, and saying, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.' Above him there was an inscription: 'This is the King of the Jews'. One of the criminals hanging there abused him: 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us as well.' But the other spoke up and rebuked him. 'Have you no fear of God at all?' he said. 'You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He answered him, 'In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'*

*It was now about the sixth hour and the sun's light failed, so that darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. The veil of the Sanctuary was torn right down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice saying, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' With these words he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he gave praise to God and said, 'Truly, this was an upright man.'” (Luke 23 v 33-47)*

*“Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God, and he got up from table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'At the*

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*moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'Never!' said Peter. 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus replied, 'If I do not wash you, you can have no share with me.' Simon Peter said, 'Well then, Lord, not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well!'*

*When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments again he went back to the table. 'Do you understand', he said, 'what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you. 'In all truth I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, no messenger is greater than the one who sent him. 'Now that you know this, blessed are you if you behave accordingly.' (John 13 v 3-17)*

## *Towards a Spirituality of Justice*

### **Introduction**

In my view, the biggest obstacle to the promotion of social justice in our Western societies is our spirituality, a spirituality that has tended to be overly pious, devotional and individualistic. Here I wish to highlight some areas where I believe that our traditional spirituality needs to be modified if we are to develop a spirituality that does justice. We as Priests and Religious have the responsibility of developing amongst those with whom we are working a spirituality that meets the needs of today. Developing such a spirituality is extremely difficult: our spirituality defines our relationship to God, to others and to our world. It therefore defines who we are to ourselves and is therefore buried very deeply in our consciousness. Changing what lies somewhere at the inner core of our being is an awesome task. It may take one or more generations. But we have to try. Obviously, much of what I say now will already have been covered in previous talks but here I will try to pull it together into a more coherent form.

In saying that our spirituality is an obstacle to the promotion of justice, I am not criticising that spirituality. That spirituality has served the Irish people, and Europe, well for several centuries. However, the times we live in are now very different and these different circumstances call for a different response, even at the level of faith.

We are used to different spiritualities – there is Ignatian Spirituality, Franciscan Spirituality, Dominican Spirituality and so on. The fact that I try to live an Ignatian spirituality does not mean that I consider Franciscan spirituality to be inferior. Different spiritualities are for different people at different times. Different spiritualities emerge in history in response to particular circumstances – what Vatican II called “the signs of the times”.

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Thus Franciscan spirituality of poverty and simplicity was a response to the wealth and pomp and seeking of honours which characterised much of the Church at that time.

Today, it seems to me “the signs of the times” suggests a new spirituality. There are two “signs of the times” which are particularly significant:

- The first is *our awareness of the extent of suffering* in our world and even within our wealthy nations. Every disaster, in every corner of the globe, appears instantly on our television or computer screens or mobile phones. Every death in the current Arab uprisings is recorded and communicated. This awareness makes it impossible for us to deny that such suffering requires a response, and it challenges a faith that claims to be based on the commandment, “love one another”.
- And the second “sign of the times” is *our awareness that this situation need not be so*. Much of the suffering in our world, and in our separate nations, is the result of decisions that are made or not made; it is man-made, using the word “man” quite consciously, as most of the decision-makers in our world are men. This was the main theme of the talks on the Option for the Poor and on our sinfulness. This awareness alerts us to the fact that the way things are in our world and nations can and ought to be changed. And this has implications for our faith and how we respond to our faith.

### **What is it to be a Christian?**

Traditionally, Roman Catholics have been recognised by their observance of law. A “good” Roman Catholic is someone who does not get divorced, does not use artificial birth control methods, attends Mass every Sunday. In the recent referendum on divorce in Malta, the Catholic Church was the main opposition group, as it was also in the referendum on divorce some years ago in Ireland. Adherence to laws laid down by the Catholic Church has been the defining characteristic of a Roman Catholic. This is



certainly the perception of those who are not Catholics and often, also, the perception of many Catholics themselves.

I have suggested that the defining characteristic of a Roman Catholic, or any Christian, should be our *compassion*. Our God is a God of compassion; there is nothing that God, as parent, wants from us more than reaching out to those of God's children who are suffering. When people look at us and recognise us as Christians, it ought to be because they find the compassion of the Christian community to be a witness to the rest of the world, to find Christians in the forefront of services reaching out to the poor, the homeless, the handicapped, making those on the margins feel welcome and wanted.

But we are called to go further. To go beyond compassion to *solidarity*. I have argued again and again that one of the central characteristics of the Christian community was a radical solidarity with each other. Solidarity is also a key concept in the Church's social teaching, developed particularly by Pope John Paul II in a number of encyclicals.

What does it mean to move beyond compassion to solidarity? There are two limitations to compassion.

The first is that in compassion we tend to give from our *excess*: it is our surplus resources, our surplus time, our surplus energy that we devote to those in need. We may decide to give a donation, or we may decide to give some of our time. Irish people have, deservedly, a wonderful reputation for compassion. Most Irish people are genuinely touched by stories and images of people suffering and will give extremely generously to those in need. Irish contributions to disasters such as the tsunami, the children of Chernobyl, the Special Olympics and other charities are amongst the highest in the world. I, too, experience the compassion of Irish people for homeless young people, whose plight touches their hearts and makes them aware of how fortunate their own children have been. Our work is largely funded by their compassion. The first limitation of compassion is that *we* decide what we will give to those in need.

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The second limitation is that *we* decide to whom we will show compassion. *We* choose the people or charities we will support, judging them to be more or less deserving. Our compassion may stir someone to donate generously to a charity which provides counselling services for children who suffered sexual abuse, but we may decide that we will not contribute to a charity that is working with ex-prisoners, presumably because we do not consider that ex-prisoners deserve our charity – even though many are in prison, certainly in Ireland, because they were unable to cope with childhood sexual abuse! Those to whom we show compassion may be chosen quite arbitrarily (such as meeting a homeless person who is begging on the street) or may be chosen for us by the media (such as the image of a child crying who has lost their parents in a tsunami or earthquake). We reach out in compassion because their suffering has touched our hearts. Our compassion is, then, a feeling of distress at the pain and suffering of another human being and a desire to do something to alleviate it, usually something concrete and immediate.

The challenge for us as Christians is to move beyond compassion to solidarity.

Solidarity is a radical expression of compassion. Solidarity is rooted not in transient *feelings* of distress at the pain of others, but in a lifelong *commitment* to alleviating the pain of others. Solidarity derives not from our sense of generosity but from our sense of justice, from an acknowledgement that we are all united in our common humanity and the pain of others is our responsibility.

Solidarity, then, goes beyond compassion in two ways:

In compassion, *we* choose both those whom we will support, and how, and at what cost, we will support them. In solidarity, we do not choose either the victims or our response – *both are chosen for us*.

First, *we* no longer decide to whom we will reach out. Solidarity is a reaching out to *all* in our world who are victims, who are poor and who are marginalized, whether we like them or not, whether we feel threatened by them or not, whether we judge them to be deserving or not. It is the suffering of others that calls us into solidarity, not the choices *we* make.

Secondly, our response to the suffering of others is chosen not by us, but by those who suffer. Solidarity is a radical commitment to do whatever is required to alleviate their suffering, at whatever cost to ourselves.

Thus our *compassion* for those who are homeless may bring us to donate generously to an appeal for a charity for homeless people – which will undoubtedly do a lot of good and alleviate a lot of suffering – but we may at the same time oppose the opening of a hostel for homeless people in our neighbourhood, on the grounds that our neighbourhood is not suitable for such a project.

Our *solidarity* with those who are homeless, however, may bring us to support such a project, if it is in the interests of homeless people, despite the cost (real or imagined) to ourselves, or to our property values. Solidarity compels us to support policies in favour of the poor which may be detrimental to our own interests.

Solidarity is a willingness to respond to the suffering of others with a love which is prepared to see *my* life changed, even radically, in order to bring change to those who suffer. The ultimate expression of solidarity is to be willing to lay down my life in order to bring life to others. It is a recognition that my concern for others is also, ultimately, a concern for myself; that *my* good cannot be achieved independently of *your* good; that in neglecting others, I am also diminishing myself. As the African proverb says:

*“If your neighbour is hungry, your chickens aren't safe”.*

John Paul II, troubled by the poverty and injustice in our world, and, no doubt, reflecting on his own experience of the Solidarity Trade Union in Poland, gave a new impetus to the biblical message of solidarity.

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*“Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” (“On Social Concerns”)*

He became convinced that solidarity of the poor and with the poor is the path to social justice:

*“Positive signs in the contemporary world are the growing awareness of the solidarity of the poor among themselves, their efforts to support one another and their public demonstrations on the social scene which (...) present their own needs and rights in the face of the inefficiency or corruption of the public authorities.” (“On Social Concerns”).*

He sees such solidarity as a test of the Church’s commitment.

*“The Church is firmly committed to this cause (the cause of solidarity of the poor and with the poor) for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ, so that she can truly be ‘the Church of the poor’”. (“On Human Work”)*

Indeed, as we already discussed, a commitment to solidarity with the poor is a defining characteristic of the follower of Jesus.

### **The people of God**

In the spirituality that I inherited, the most important thing in life was *my* relationship to God. Deepening my relationship to God, through prayer, retreats, reflection and indeed trying to live the commandment of love was the highest priority. Here I suggest

that there is something more *fundamental* (not more important, but more fundamental) than *my* relationship with God. And that is the relationship of the *People of God* to God. None of us goes to God on our own – we go as one of the people of God. When Yahweh made the covenant, he did not make millions of individual covenants with individual Jews, Yahweh made the covenant with the Jewish people. And Jesus called into being the new people of God, the Christian community. I go to God as one of the people of God, not just as an individual. My relationship with God exists as a part of the relationship of the People of God to God, not independently of it.

That means that if there is some defect in the relationship of the people to God to God, then this affects *my* relationship to God. Thus, if I am in Dublin, and somebody in London is treating someone else unjustly, then the relationship of the people of God to God is not as wholesome as it should be and therefore *my* relationship to God is not as wholesome as it should be. To use a stupid analogy, but I can't think of a better one, take an apple; if the apple is perfect I eat it differently than I would eat an apple with a piece that is rotten – the apple with the rotten piece I have to be careful of and make sure that when I get to that piece I eat carefully around it, whereas I can eat away at the good apple without any worries. My relationship with the two apples is quite different!

Therefore I cannot just develop my relationship to God quite independently of what is going around me, as if it had nothing to do with me. If I am to develop and deepen my relationship to God to be all that it can and should be, I have to be concerned about justice and injustice wherever it exists within the people of God. I have to promote justice in the relationships of each of the people of God to each other, and I have to fight injustice in those relationships where it exists, *precisely in order to deepen my own relationship to God.*

## **The Church**

When I was growing up, I was led to believe that belonging to the Church, if not quite guaranteeing salvation, certainly made

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it a lot more likely. By belonging to the Church, you had the grace of the sacraments and the Mass, and these were important helps to salvation. When parents come to you and confide that they are worried about their son or daughter “because they no longer go to Mass”, I wonder is part of their concern a fear that their child has now “left” the Church and their eternal salvation is at risk. In this image, the Church is a little like a lifeboat; when the boat sinks, your chance of being saved is much greater if you are in the lifeboat than if you are in the sea.

But salvation has nothing to do with being in or out of the Church. Now I see the Church, as I have said before, as the reflection of the Kingdom of God on earth. When people want to see what the Kingdom of God will be like, when it comes in its fullness, they ought to be able to look at the communities called Church and get a glimpse of what it will be like, admittedly an imperfect, sinful, human reflection of the Kingdom, but nevertheless a reflection of the Kingdom of God.

Sadly, the Church is far from being such an image or reflection. Many, including women who are half the human race, do not feel that they are treated justly or equally within the Church; many, including those who are divorced, are in second-relationships, in same-sex relationships or who have had an abortion, do not have an experience of being made to feel wanted or cared for; many continue to feel second-class or uncomfortable within the communities we call Church.

So, by becoming, or remaining, a member of the Church, we accept the responsibility of witnessing to the Kingdom of God in our own relationships with others. We take on the responsibility of ensuring that the community we belong to, called Church, becomes a reflection of the Kingdom of God.

### **The Cross**

The most significant event in the life of Jesus was the Cross. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, his life obviously would not have the meaning which it has for us. The Cross was also clearly, for Jesus as a human being, the most important event of his own life.

If the Cross was the most important event in the life of Jesus, then it too should be the most important event in the life of each of the followers of Jesus. So what is the Cross? What was the experience of the Cross for Jesus?

I imagine that Jesus, as he hung on the cross, must have experienced total failure. He had been given a mission by his Father and now everything he had tried to achieve lay in ruins. Even the few followers he had gathered around him, who were to continue the work after he had gone, even they had fled. He must have wondered where he had gone wrong, what mistakes had led to this. I imagine the Cross to have been for Jesus *the experience of total failure*.

When Jesus says, hanging on the Cross:

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15 v 34)*

I suspect he meant it. He wasn't just praying a psalm.

Yet out of this failure, God brought success. From Cross, to Resurrection. What appeared to human beings as total failure was in God's eyes total success.

In the struggle for justice, in the building of the Kingdom of God, there is often far more failure than success. Our pet project collapses, what we had tried to achieve is destroyed, our life work sometimes is undone. The experience of the Cross is that what appears to be failure to us human beings may well, in the eyes of God, be success. In fact the Cross is our constant reminder that we don't even know what success and failure means in the plan of God. I could run the best hostel for homeless young people in Ireland; they all go on to Third Level Education and get good, permanent, pensionable jobs. People would say, “McVerry, you're wonderful”, Government ministers would praise our project as an example of their good judgement in funding it. And how would that be achieved? By taking in all the homeless young people who have no problems, and excluding those who have a drug problem, a personality disorder, who have been abused, beaten and neglected or whose behaviour is difficult. Yet these are the homeless young people who most need help. In the eyes

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of human beings, I may be running a wonderful hostel; in the eyes of God, my hostel may be a failure. Or conversely, I can take in all the most difficult young people, keep them out of jail, but only for a couple of years, get them off drugs, but only for a while, and everyone looks and says: "He's wasting his time, all those homeless people are ending up in jail or on drugs". In the eyes of human beings, what I am doing is a total failure, in the eyes of God it may be total success. The Cross is the lesson that we don't even know what, in the eyes of God, is failure and what is success. God does not ask us to be successful, God asks us to be faithful. If we are faithful and successful, we succeed; if we are faithful and fail, we succeed! We have the best of both worlds! If we are faithful to what God is asking of us, we cannot fail.

And so in our building of the Kingdom, in our struggle for justice, we are intensely joyful. We do what God asks of us and we leave success and failure to God. In our struggle for the Kingdom, our achievements may only end in the Cross but we know that out of that failure, the Master Builder is creating the wonder of the Kingdom.

### **Prayer**

It is often presumed that those who are involved in social justice issues do not pray very much, or at all, do not have time to pray, are sometimes not even being interested in prayer. They have too many important things to do for God.

However, in the work for justice, there are two kinds of prayer that we cannot easily avoid, that is imposed upon us by the nature of the work. These two kinds of prayer are described in Donal Dorr's book, *The Spirituality of Justice*.

The first kind of prayer is the *prayer of discernment*. In the struggle for justice, there are very few issues which are black and white – there are only shades of grey. It is usually very difficult to decide concretely what is the right thing to do. I have a young lad standing at the door of my hostel at 2 o'clock in the morning and he is homeless with a drug problem; do I let him in and risk everyone in the hostel developing a drug problem, or do I keep



him out in which case he has no hope of dealing with his drug problem? And I have thirty seconds to decide! There is no correct answer to this dilemma. Sometimes I may let him in, sometimes I may say no, depending on a whole set of circumstances. It is a very difficult question to answer, “What concretely does God want of me in this situation?”

Or there may be a demonstration on behalf of the unemployed or some other marginalised group in the community and I wish to show my solidarity. But it is organised by a very dubious group, of which the Church and many in society would not approve, and my superior would not be pleased if a picture of me in this march were to appear in the local paper! Do I march or don't I?

If I am to be true to the struggle for justice, I need to be praying the prayer of discernment. If I stop praying the prayer of discernment, then the danger increases that my work for justice will become an ideological struggle, or go down a cul-de-sac, that it will become *my* struggle and not the struggle for the Kingdom.

“Lord, what do you want me to do, here and now, in this concrete situation?” A decision has to be made, like all decisions, as best I can, with the knowledge I have, in the circumstances as I understand them. I do not have to wait till I am *certain* that my decision is the right one – in that case, I will be waiting for ever! In the spirit of the prayer of discernment, I make the decision I believe God wants me to make. If it is the wrong decision, then if I am open to God, it will become clear, sooner or later, that it was the wrong decision and I may be able to take steps to undo it or reverse it. The prayer of discernment, while it has its moments of formal prayer, is much more a way of being, an attitude, a questioning, an openness to God. I may not have time to sit down for half-an hour to pray; a decision is needed now. It is this openness to God which is the prayer of discernment.

“Pray always” says St. Paul. In the work for justice, praying always is imposed on us by the very work itself.

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The second form of prayer that those in the struggle for justice are forced into is one that I resonate with even more than the prayer of discernment – it is the *prayer of desperation*. There is so much failure, so many times beating your head against the wall, feeling that you are getting nowhere, or even feeling that things are getting worse, not better, that you are forced to pray the prayer of desperation. The prayer of desperation is the acknowledgement that God is God and I am not God. It is the acknowledgement that the Kingdom we are building is God's kingdom, not mine. God knows what God is doing, I certainly don't! When our pet project collapses, when our efforts fail, then we have to pray the prayer of desperation; otherwise, we become embittered, cynical, angry as we see *our* plans failing.

Or there are those young homeless people I know who would be doing themselves a favour if they stepped out in front of a bus; their lives are so damaged, they are in so much pain, they are incapable of any long-term relationships, and there is nothing I can do about it; I can feed them, clothe them and help them to feel that someone cares. But their deeper problems are beyond anything I can do. They will continue to live lonely, painful lives and I cannot change that. Then I pray the prayer of desperation; "This is your child, God, I hope you know what you are doing because I certainly don't."

### **Sin**

To promote a spirituality that does justice, we need to promote an understanding of sin which goes beyond the individual wrongs that I am guilty of. Helping people to acknowledge that they participate in the sinfulness of the structures within which they are immersed and to accept responsibility for doing what little they can to change those structures broadens the notion of sin. However, I have said enough about that; I mention it here just for the sake of completeness.

## The Parables of the Kingdom

When Jesus talks about the Kingdom, he always talks in parables. “The Kingdom is like.” The Kingdom is the culmination of everything that Jesus preached; it is the climax of God’s whole enterprise. We might therefore expect Jesus to talk about the coming of the Kingdom in language that describes something dramatic, awe-inspiring, earth-shattering.

On the contrary, we find that the Kingdom which Jesus describes has two characteristics:

First, *the Kingdom is always something small.*

The Kingdom is like the *mustard seed*, the tiniest of all seeds;

the Kingdom is like the *pearl* of great price, a tiny pearl, put it in your hand, close your fist and you cannot see it;

the Kingdom is like the *treasure* hidden in the field, a tiny box filled with treasures.

Second, *the kingdom is always something hidden.*

The Kingdom is like the leaven in the yeast, you can’t see it or put your hand in and take it out and look at it, it is *hidden* in the yeast.

The Kingdom is like the treasure *hidden* in the field.

The Kingdom is like the seed the farmer sows – he looks out at the field, day after day, and sees nothing happening. If he didn’t know better, he would say he had wasted his time. But the farmer knows that the seed is growing under the ground, hidden and unseen.

So Jesus describes the coming of the Kingdom as something tiny and something hidden. When I ask then, where do we find the Kingdom growing here on earth, we look, not for some earth shattering event, like the overthrow of brutal dictatorships (although undoubtedly that too is a sign of the coming of the Kingdom, but it is not the typical sign), but we look for little signs, small projects, that no-one knows about, which are trying to

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improve the quality of life for those who are on the margins. It is the small little efforts of people caring for each other, in unheard-of housing estates or isolated rural communities, which are the typical signs of the Kingdom of God. They do not make front page on the national newspapers, people are not coming from far and abroad to look at this wonder project. The small little efforts, the little struggles, the community projects reaching out to the young, to the elderly, to those on the margins, which are trying to improve life for those who are poor, isolated, struggling are the typical signs of the coming of the Kingdom. The phrase in your Constitutions, “unknown and even hidden in this world”, describes not just your own ministry but describes the role of all those, clerical and lay, who are building the Kingdom of God.

This concept, that the Kingdom is being built by the small and hidden efforts of ordinary people to care and share, is very empowering. We don't have to be a Mother Teresa, we don't have to go to live in a slum neighbourhood in Africa or shanty town in South America. Wherever we are living, whatever we are working at, there we can help to build the Kingdom. Each of us can get involved in small little, hidden, efforts to improve the quality of life of others and these little efforts are the cornerstones on which the Kingdom is being built.

The early Christian community, who understood that they were the Kingdom which Jesus was talking about, was a community that was indeed small and very hidden. It was the quality of their life together that identified them as the Kingdom, not their size or their visibility.

Jesus said:

*“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”*

Where Jesus is, there we find the Kingdom of God. Where two or three, who believe in the Risen Jesus, are reaching out to one another, or to others, there we find Jesus present, there we

find the community or Kingdom that Jesus was talking about. Hence we need to look at what we mean by community.

### **The concept of community**

Traditionally, we have understood community to be those who live in close proximity to each other. In the Church, parishes are usually identified as communities. Many of you working in parishes are trying to build community amongst those who live there. But in today's world, this may no longer be a suitable model for community. Some of the changes that have occurred in Western societies are imposing new understandings of what community are:

First, increased prosperity means that people today often have their own cars or adequate resources to use public transport. Those with whom they socialise and whose support they value, may be very scattered geographically; Their "community" may not now live in their neighbourhood or in close proximity to them. Today, people are less dependent on those who live close to them for their social life and supports. However, in inner city parishes, which are usually poor parishes, and to which you have given a priority, this is less true; those who are poor have less access to transport and hence may be more dependent on those who live close to them. It is often remarked that poor neighbourhoods have a stronger sense of community.

Secondly, people today are less likely to spend their lives in the same neighbourhood than in the past. Indeed, during their lifetime, people may live in many different neighbourhoods, as their needs require and their resources allow. This is often linked to job mobility. Hence their commitment to any particular neighbourhood, or involvement in community, may be weaker than in the past as they may see their time in a particular location as limited.

Thirdly, the increased individualism of our culture persuades us to become as self-sufficient and independent of others as possi-

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ble, through purchasing and using goods and services, as I have already talked about. Building a sense of community becomes an optional extra for those who are that way inclined. Many people today live quite satisfied consumer lives, going to work in the morning and returning in the evening to the security of their homes, going out now and again for a night with their friends, taking a weekend from time to time down the country, and installing burglar alarms to keep the neighbours out. They have neither the time nor the inclination to get to know their neighbours and to build community, nor do they see much need for doing so.

Parishes are primarily administrative structures for the Church as an organisation. The communities in the future which will witness to the presence of Jesus in our world will be much smaller and will centre around shared concerns or interests, such as Charismatic communities, or L'Arche communities, or Basic Christian Communities – I'm sure you can identify others. If communities are to be the places where we find our security, then we have to allow people to choose their community. Hence the task of building communities which are scattered and not easily defined appears to be very difficult.

But perhaps not. Maybe our role is not to build community, but to recognise community where it exists, to support community wherever we recognise it, and to encourage others to find their own community. We recognise community in the caring and sharing that characterises the lives of people together, often very small groups of people, in the security that people feel from belonging, and their faith in the Risen Jesus.

So perhaps for our prayer we might take the passage from John's Gospel which describes the role of all those who work for the Kingdom.

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-dresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear*

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*even more. You are clean already, by means of the word that I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, unless it remains part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.” (John 15 v 1-5)*

*“This is how my Father’s glory is shown: by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples. I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy be complete. This is my commandment: love one another just as I love you...”*

*“You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures.” (John 15 v 8-16)*