

The Bartholomew Gospel

by

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To my friends,
Philip and Philip,
and to my congregation
at St Bartholomew's, Dinard



Life is worth dying for
Love is worth the giving

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Prologue

‘And the Word became flesh, and lived among us.’ John 1 v14

A gospel according to St Bartholomew actually exists. It’s apocryphal and, to be honest, not a patch on the real thing.

What I’ve tried to write, in one sense is. Mine is drawn from the Gospels and Acts. In Matthew, Mark, Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, Bartholomew appears only as a name in a list. In John, instead we find Nathaniel who is mentioned at the start and end of that Gospel. Once it was a matter of debate whether Nathaniel and Bartholomew are one and the same; now contemporary consensus is they are. I’m inclined to agree.

In addition to these few references, fact is Bartholomew was there as one of the Twelve and he will have witnessed and experienced much of Jesus’ ministry first-hand. So I have taken a reasonable dramatic licence with what we know in order to imagine what it might have been like for him to follow Jesus. I’m not a biblical scholar but what I’ve written is the fruit of over 40 years of teaching and preaching.

What is very different between the four actual gospels and mine is the character of the individual author. Each gospel may have a distinctive authorial voice but the person writing is largely invisible. In John, we’re not sure whether he is the beloved disciple. In Mark, we’re not sure if he is the young man who fled naked from the Garden of Gethsemane the night of Jesus’ arrest. Does the fact Matthew is a tax collector or Luke a doctor make any difference to what and how they

write? In 'The Bartholomew Gospel', I try to make Nathaniel three-dimensional, a person in his own right, whereas the four evangelists are only really concerned with focusing on Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, rather than on themselves.

Why? Because I think religion is a love story: the history of God's love for us and our response to that love. We need real people to be examples of beings loved, of being loved and, in turn, loving others. Bartholomew is loved by Jesus and responds to his call to follow him and like him to die for the love of others. In their friendship, Philip and Bartholomew exemplify God's love.

Whilst trying to be sensitive to the time, customs and culture, trying to avoid silly anachronisms, my language and the way Bartholomew speaks owe more to the twenty-first century than to the much loved cadences of the King James Bible. For this reason, when quoting, I have used the recent translation of the New Testament by Bishop Tom Wright. To my mind, it is right and proper that each generation should, as best we can, make the story of Jesus live for our own time.

The friendship between Philip and Nathaniel is a given. In my church, a stained glass window depicting St Philip looks across to one of the martyred St Bartholomew. Uncertainty cloaks what happened to Bartholomew after the Day of Pentecost but for where and how he met his death, we have the Roman Martyrology to thank. Being skinned alive is a particularly unpleasant way to die though the statue of St Bartholomew by Damien Hurst is surprisingly heroic, muscular, enviably slim, his peeled skin draped over his raised right arm, his right hand holding a skinner's knife pointing up to heaven.

But why bother to write a gospel through the eyes of Bartholomew? Inspiration came one January morning while shaving. I had just started my sixth year as priest-in-charge of the Anglican church of St Bartholomew, Dinard, founded in 1871 by a growing British community who with some well-heeled Americans had transformed a quiet, Breton fishing village into a thriving seaside resort of La Belle Époque. Once there were seven Anglican churches in the area – now just us – though there are two new Anglican churches, one to the south in Brittany based around Ploërmel and one to the east in Normandy based around Gratot-Hommël.

With the prospect of a further three year contract here, I had time and opportunity to write. And one reason to do so was to make the saint to whom our church is dedicated better known. Bartholomew had not been my apostle of choice but being in a church dedicated to him focuses the mind and I have come to love and respect this man who responded to Jesus' call to follow him, who took the gospel abroad and ultimately died for what he believed.

In our church, a new stained glass window was installed in 2001 to celebrate the Second Millennium and so complete our stained glass with a picture of our patron saint. It pulls no punches. The image of a round-eyed Bartholomew looking sadly up to heaven, his flesh pink, his dead skin limp, held out towards us, dominates the walls of a French town from which hang the corpses of Protestants killed during the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre on 24th August, 1572 beneath which a village scene depicts Bartholomew preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to some Armenians who will later show their gratitude for his love of them by making him a martyr.

To mark our 140th anniversary, an icon of St Bartholomew was commissioned. It was written in situ by a local iconographer, Karen Blampied, in the week leading up to our patronal festival in August 2011. Rich in symbolism, an icon is written not painted because it is meant to be read. St Bartholomew stands dressed in robes whose colours reflect the style of an Armenian icon. In his right hand, he holds a book, Matthew's gospel in Hebrew, and a martyr's cross. In his left hand, he holds up a skinner's knife. His bare feet, appropriate for an apostle, rest on a green edged with fig leaves, a symbol of the Judaism in which his faith was grounded. His head is surrounded by a halo; his eyes look up to heaven where to his left is the vision promised him by Jesus represented by a beam of light whilst to his right in the top corner, an angel proffers the martyr his skin.

St Bartholomew deserves to be better known. The story of which he is but a small part already is.

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1 Who am I ?

'Bartholomew' Mark 3 v18; 'Nathaniel' John 1 v45

I am my father's son.

At my circumcision, eight-days-old, I was named Nathaniel (a gift of God) by my father, Tolmai. To him, I was his gift from God.

I was his only boy. Outside the family, I was known as Tolmai's son – Bartolmai – Bartholomew to you.

When I became one of Jesus' disciples, it was natural for them to call me Bartholomew and the name stuck. It's what Matthew, Mark and Luke all call me in their Gospels and in Acts. But not my friend, Philip. He knew me as Nathaniel and it was to his Nathaniel he came that day when first he met Jesus to tell me of him. So young John, innocent John, John a son of thunder, kindly followed my friend's example, using my familiar name in what he wrote of me.

So are there two of me? No, not really: just me, my father's son.



My parents lived in Cana of Galilee and that's where I grew up. A prosperous family, we were not rich but never short of anything. It was said we were of noble blood but I'm not sure. But of this I am sure: we were good Jews, trying to live the

good Jewish life according to the Torah, the Law of Moses. And, of course, we did.

Each year at Pesach (Passover) we travelled some ninety miles south to Jerusalem to offer the annual sacrifice in the Temple. We stayed with our relations in the city and shared the Passover meal with them there. Passover is a special time. It reminds us that the angel of death had passed over us because the blood of a lamb smeared on the lintel of the door to our homes showed him we were part of G-d's Chosen People. The food symbolically reminds us of the time we were slaves in Egypt: the lamb, the unleavened bread (matzah), the bitter herbs, the charoset (a paste made with fruit, spices, wine and matzah meal). The youngest male at table, I remember asking the four questions: 'Why, on this night . . . ?' Food has always been important to us as a people and in that Seder meal, we Jews were united by the act of eating and drinking and talking together as family and by the knowledge of what we shared: that we were His Children whom He has called from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.

I loved the Temple – a magnificent place, full of wonder and mystery where, even as a boy, I felt the awe-inspiring presence of the One whom we worship, whose true name we were forbidden to pronounce, forbidden even to write in full. Instead, we called him Lord – Adonai.

And He speaks to us. Not in the Aramaic we use everyday nor in the Greek the Romans use but in Hebrew, the language of the Covenant between Him and us, his Chosen People – 'I will be your G-d and you will be my people,' wrote the

prophet Jeremiah. It is the language of our scriptures which my father read aloud in the synagogue where we went each Sabbath to worship Him.

And He is with us: present in our daily prayers; present as we remember Him each time we stop to eat and drink; present as we wash our hands or wash the food we eat. Then we were waiting for Him to send the Messiah, the Son of David, who would set us free from foreigners and restore the Kingdom of Israel to us, His children.

So I grew up a healthy boy, an honest boy, a cheerful boy with a ready, encouraging smile. I learnt to read Hebrew, became a son of the Law, Bar Mitzvah, and took my place alongside my father in synagogue. And when news reached us that John the Baptist was proclaiming the coming of the Messiah and baptising folk in the Jordan, I was thrilled that what we longed to see might soon be here with us.

With my father's blessing, I went south and saw John for myself. I heard what he had to say and there I was baptised by him and there I first met my friend, Philip. Philip was from Bethsaida, a town on the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee where his father was a fisherman.

John looked like a prophet of old. Wild-looking from the wilderness, he was dressed in a garment of camel hair, a leather belt round his waist and sandals on his feet. People said he fulfilled what was written in the prophet Isaiah: 'Look I am sending my messenger ahead of me; he will clear the way for you. A shout goes up in the desert: Make way for the Lord! Clear a straight path for him!' Exciting

or what? And his message made us wild with excitement. 'Repent and be baptised!' As Jews, we knew all about sin and doing wrong and the need to purify ourselves from the moral taint that defiles us. That's what being kosher and trefah mean, being pure and clean or being unfit to touch or eat. Ultimately, to be able to stand pure in the sight of the Lord is the dream we Jews all share. And here was John, a prophet of the old school, calling us to confess our sinfulness and to be washed clean in the Jordan, the river through which we once had crossed into our Promised Land.

And I went down to the river, left my clothes on its bank and was immersed in the living waters of the Jordan. As the waters flowed over me, John held me safe. Dripping wet from my ritual bath in the open air, I returned to the bank to dry myself and dress. I felt like a new man. It felt like a new beginning. It was wonderful.

And there, as I said, I first met Philip. We were the same age and shared the same excitement at being baptised and the prospect of what was to come. We ate together, stayed the night together, returned home together the following day.

And that was how we became friends. We were two young men with this in common: Jewish lads who believed in the One to come and who shared the joy of being awake at the dawning of a new age.



2 Who me?

'He appointed twelve . . . to be with him' Mark 3 v14

We were friends. Philip liked me and I liked being with him.

Sometimes I went to stay with him. The journey from Cana to Bethsaida where he lived with his family was more than twenty miles. If I wanted to see him, to be with him, I had to go and stay with them. Philip was a fisherman: he taught me to fish and to swim. My love of water dates from our experience in the Jordan. There's little chance to swim in Cana.

Together we studied Torah. Philip could read but he was not that quick or that good – and I was pleased to help him. With the other young men in the Bethsaida synagogue, we spent time in prayer and in study when Philip was free from work in and on his family's boat.

Together we talked about the coming of the Messiah, sometimes well into the night. We felt excited that now was the time the Messiah would appear. The Roman presence in Jerusalem was resented. A Roman garrison overlooked the Temple. A Roman governor had replaced King Herod as ruler in Judea. Surely now was the time to free us from foreign rule, the time for justice and mercy to walk humbly hand-in-hand, the time for us to be ruled again by a Son of David?

It felt good to be young and alive at this time.



The day our lives changed for ever, Philip had gone down to the shore to work on his father's boat while I took myself off to his family's plot of land. It was walled. There were vines, some olive trees and in the centre an old fig tree. As ever, the weather was good. The sun shone in a cloudless sky. As it grew warmer, I sought the shade of the fig tree.

There Philip found me lost-in-thought. He was excited, breathing hard, having run up from the shore. What he said was what we'd longed to hear. He had met the Messiah in the flesh. He had spoken to him. Now he wanted me to come with him and to meet him for myself. And sleep-confused, amazed, I heard who this Messiah was supposed to be: 'Jesus, Joseph's son, from Nazareth!' Nazareth? He must be joking. 'Are you telling me that something good can come out of Nazareth?' As I heard myself pour cold water on my friend's enthusiasm, I blushed at being so petty, so prejudiced. But Philip, ever patient with me, helped me up and told me to come and see for myself. So we did.



We found him where Philip had left him, walking by the shore. Before I had a chance to speak, he spoke to me.

'Here he comes. Look at him! He's a real Israelite. Genuine through and through.'

'How did you get to know me?'

'Oh I saw you under the fig tree before Philip spoke to you.'

‘Rabbi, you’re the son of God! You’re the king of Israel!’

‘Wait a minute. Are you telling me that you believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You’ll see a lot more than that! In fact I’m telling you the solemn truth. You’ll see heaven opened, and God’s angels going up and down upon the son of man.’



So Philip and I became two of his disciples, two of the Twelve. And the rest is history as well you know. But what was going on in the dialogue that in his gospel John so faithfully records?

For a start, Philip and I are excited, out-of-breath from having hurried down to the shore. On our way, we didn’t waste our breath talking: we just wanted to find him. I wanted to see him for myself. And as we approached, I was too nervous to speak but he spoke first and what he said touched a chord in me. It wasn’t simply his words; there was something else. It was as if he already knew me, recognised me and was welcoming me home.

And his words were so me. He knew me all right. He caught me to a T. He knew who I was, what I sought to be – ‘a real Israelite’ – the ‘genuine’ article, honest, without deceit or guile.

But something held me back. Earlier with Philip, it had been my stupid prejudice about Nazareth – about nothing good coming from Nazareth. Now with Jesus, it was simply a question of self-defence, of not letting me be so easily caught by

him. So my defence was simple logic – how come you think you really know me? I was challenging him to prove what, in my heart, I already knew – that he truly knew me, that I felt good with him.

And he did know me – he said I was sitting under a fig tree – the fig, fruit of our land, symbol of the Torah, the love and care of our Lord for His people. Before Philip came to get me, Jesus said he'd seen me sitting there. How could he have known? There was no one to tell him. He must be clairvoyant, have the gift of second sight.

And my reply surprised me and surprised him. Yes, my mouth shaped the words but I felt inspired, informed by an understanding greater than my own. All that I longed for, all the hopes Philip and I had shared, were embodied here in this man, 'Jesus, Joseph's son from Nazareth'. And I heard myself blurting out my faith in him, 'Teacher you're the son of God! You're the king of Israel!' Blasphemy or what? But it felt true to me.

And gently, he smiled encouragement at me and the warmth of his prophecy washed over me: 'Are you telling me that you believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You'll see a lot more than that! You'll see heaven opened, and God's angels going up and down upon the son of man.'

And of course he was right – eventually I did.



3 Wedding in Cana

'There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee.' John 2 v1

I had two invitations to one wedding. One as Bartholomew, a disciple of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth. One as Nathaniel, my father's son.

But first I had to see my father.



It wasn't easy for me; it wasn't easy for him.

My father, Tolmai, was a good man. He loved me as a father should his son. He wanted the best for me and I respected him because he had fathered me.

I wanted to share my joy with him, my enthusiasm at having met the one we'd long expected, my excitement at having been called by him to be one of his disciples. My father trusted me. What I felt was clear for him to see and he respected my judgement. If I said something was true, then he believed me. He assured me that I could always come home if I ever felt the need. Our door would always be open. My welcome would always be warm. Then he gave me his blessing, gave me a hug and kissed me good-bye. Separately, we made our way to the same wedding.



The wedding was excellent. We were well received. The groom was a close relation of Mary, the mother of Jesus, so that's why she and he and we were all invited. The wedding took place in our synagogue in Cana and that's why most of us who lived in Cana came as well.

We Jews love a wedding. Marriage is life-giving, life-long, 'lechayim'. Marriage is the best place for two people truly to know each other. By becoming one, children are born – if possible 'a quiverful' as the psalmist says!

One thing we Jews do well is to party. There was wine to drink before the meal; there was wine to drink with the food; there was wine to drink with the speeches; there was wine to drink with the singing and dancing; wine to drink while the music played and to drink while we talked. There was no end of wine and no one could complain.



The first sign that something was seriously wrong was when Mary came to Jesus to tell him the wine had run out! Not to have enough to drink was a serious breach of hospitality. Such shame would not easily be forgotten. Such a lapse would not easily be forgiven. The damage to a family's reputation would be considerable and lasting, not something you'd wish on anyone especially not on their wedding day.

Jesus was not pleased. He knew his mother wanted him to do something. But he told her that it was not his problem – besides his time had not yet come. Mary

was unfazed by his apparent refusal to act. She knew he could and she knew he would so without any fuss, she simply told the servants to do whatever he told them.

And they did. He instructed them to fill with water the stone jars set aside for a mikvah, the ritual purification bath we Jews take at certain times for certain reasons according to the Law. Water from the well was used to fill all six, over a hundred gallons in all. Then he instructed them to take some of it to the chief steward of the wedding banquet to taste without letting on where the water-now-wine had come from. Astonishingly, the man liked what he tasted, liked what he was drinking, so much so that puzzled, he called the bridegroom over and said, 'What everybody normally does is to serve the good wine first, and then the worse stuff when people have had plenty to drink. But you've kept the good wine till now!' What the young man then replied John does not record, but perhaps he smiled: after all, such criticism sounds awfully like a compliment.

Good or what? The servants knew; Mary knew; and we, his disciples, knew; but the chief steward responsible for making sure that all went well had no idea that what to his discerning palate tasted like such good wine had just been drawn from a local well.

Jesus' first miracle in public took place at this wedding in Cana of Galilee. Turning water into wine at the time seemed like an excellent start to his career but the exact purpose of what he was doing was not so clear. Certainly, Jesus had saved the day for the family of which he was a part. But on reflection, the miracle

itself at heart was transformational: water into wine was a sign that Jesus had come to transform us all.

Well he would – if only we would let him.



4 Our teacher

'He went round the villages, teaching.' Mark6 v6

Jesus at heart was a teacher, our teacher. Rabbi means teacher and well he deserved that title because he came to teach. And we were his pupils, his students, his disciples, literally sometimes we were the ones sat at his feet, ready to listen, eager to be taught. Later, we would be his apostles, the ones sent out to teach.

So what makes for a good teacher? Love of people. Love for the people being taught. If a pupil thinks the teacher knows who he is and likes him, then the teacher has caught the pupil, engaged his attention. Love is a better motivation than fear. I knew he loved me.

So what makes for a good teacher? A sense of audience. For us to know he is aware of us, of where we are at and how we are reacting to what he says, tailoring the message and the medium to us who are meant to hear it. I knew he knew me.

So what makes for a good teacher? Communication. Effective communication. For us to understand what is being said to us, it needs to be expressed in a way that we can grasp. He could do that.

So what makes for a good teacher? Inspiration. To feel that we are in the presence of someone with energy and understanding, a passion for what he shares, whose enthusiasm is genuine, palpable. He had that.



Good teaching is a matter of method, content and tone. Jesus, our Master, had mastered all three.

His method of teaching varied. Stories. Everyone loves and remembers stories and he used story to good effect, embodying eternal truths in daily realities: being mugged, then left on the side of the road; losing a sheep; a coin; or a son. He used parables, drawing parallels between what we knew about already with what he wanted us to understand: sowing seed; weeds; the size of a mustard seed; and yeast making bread rise.

If he used parables, then it was to engage our brains. We had to work at what was being said, to work out the meaning for ourselves, to find the truth that a story contains. There might be a treasure in the field but we had to dig it up for ourselves. There might be a pearl beyond price to acquire but first we had to be looking for it.

And he was patient with us when we just didn't get it. When he told the crowd about the parable of the sower, at the time we hadn't a clue; but when we were on our own, he gently explained the method – and then it clicked. We began to work things out for ourselves. Throw enough time and effort at something and you will end up mastering most things.

He used questions to make us think. When asked a question, he could question the questioner. Very Jewish – answer a question with a question. So when a Lawyer asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus asks him what the Law

says. When asked whether we should pay tax to Rome, Jesus asks for coin and then asks whose head is on it? Jesus was not simply being clever or smart, though he was clearly both, but he wanted us to use our intelligence for ourselves. Why have a brain in the first place if we were not meant to think for ourselves?

His content was essentially the same: the love of God. The love of God for us. Our love for Him. Our love for our neighbour even as we love ourselves. For Jesus, to love was to fulfil the whole of the Law; for him, to do the loving thing in every situation was what the Law required of us. In truth, the content of his teaching was not so much about the letter of the Law but the spirit underlying the Law – that spirit is love.

He could present us with a paradox – a seeming contradiction. He taught about the need to give away and to give up in order to store up treasure in heaven. He taught about the cost and the benefit of following the way, the truth and the life. He taught about living and dying, about death and new life, about the fate that ultimately awaited him in Jerusalem – necessary to fulfil God's plan.

He spoke of our right relationship with God. For a Jew, to be righteous, 'tsedeq' in Hebrew, was of prime importance. For a Jew, to be righteous, 'dikaios' in Greek, was the guarantee of being right in the sight of God. What Jesus taught was how to live the good life which would enable us to walk with God in a new and living relationship with Him. He taught that God was our Father, Abba, Daddy, who was sending his Son into the world so that through him we might be saved; through him by adoption be brothers of Jesus, and hence be sons of God.

He taught us about the Holy Spirit who would come and be with us, who would inspire, inform and encourage us. He taught us about his death and about his rising from the dead on the third day.

On reflection, much of what he said did not always make sense to me at the time. On reflection, it has come to be clearer in the light of my experience.

And lastly, tone.

What surprised folk who heard Jesus teach was his tone – he taught with authority. And that did not necessarily please everyone – especially those in authority who thought they knew best. They could recite scripture, cited scripture they'd learnt by heart, whereas he was a teacher who taught from the heart, going to the heart of the matter. He knew what he was talking about and that was challenging to those who heard him teach. He could speak with authority because he was an authority on what he taught.

When Jesus taught, there was sense of real excitement – that we were listening to someone who was really in-the-know. He had the gift. Was he not Jesus, the Word of God, speaking the word of God to us?



5 Miracle worker

'Blind people are seeing! Lame people are walking!' Matthew 11 v5

A miracle! It was a miracle.

Well, I guess what you think about such things will depend on your experience and on how you make sense of the world. For me, miracles are part of my world, the stories I heard as a boy in synagogue. The birth of their son, Isaac, to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Joseph, sold into slavery in Egypt so that he was there to welcome his brothers and his father to their new home. Moses, leading the Children of Israel across the Red Sea whose waters promptly closed over the pursuing Egyptian chariots, drowning them. Joshua, leading the Children of Israel dry-shod across the Jordan into the Promised Land. Elijah and Elisha, restoring dead boys to their mother's arms alive.

There is no end of miracles but do you have to believe in order to see them or for them to take place?

There is a danger in any miracle. Who is it for? What is it for? Jesus told us of his temptations by Satan in the wilderness. He'd been fasting for forty days so the first temptation was the challenge to turn stones into bread. Great one! If Jesus was the Son of God then he could. And there was a good reason to do so – he was hungry. But to do so would be to abuse his power, by being selfish. Of course, Satan was deliberately goading him, trying to provoke a silly act, but he didn't rise to the bait and blocked the challenge saying, 'The Bible says that it

takes more than bread to keep you alive. You actually live on every word that comes out of God's mouth.' If I'd been there, I would have clapped.

So every miracle that Jesus did was carefully not casually done. There was always a good reason to use the power that God had given him.

Take the miracles of healing.

There are so many. The blind see. The deaf hear. The dumb speak. The lame walk. The leper is healed of a virulent skin disease. Even the dead, like Jairus's daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and our friend, Lazarus, are restored to life. And why? To show that God has the power to heal and that power is made manifest by Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. In another real sense, the eyes of the blind are opened because they can see that Jesus is the Messiah, foretold by the prophet, Isaiah. The men who broke through a roof to lower their friend down to the room where Jesus could heal him, trusted that Jesus had the power to heal. The centurion, who sent word that Jesus did not need even to enter his house, knew that he had the power to cure his boy. The woman suffering from a continual flow of blood knew Jesus could stop her haemorrhage just by her touching him. In each case, the power flowed from him to do what was necessary and in each case the truth about him was clear.

Take the miracles of power over nature.

When Jesus stilled the storm on the Lake, we were so frightened of drowning that we shouted to wake him up. He stood up, spoke calming words and the waves

and the wind shut up, like naughty children fell silent. And in the stillness after the storm, we were scared because it was so obvious to us who was in our boat with us. In the middle of the night, when Jesus walked on the water, we were terrified we were seeing a ghost moving towards us over the water. But he called to us and Peter, reckless as ever, had the bottle to step out to Jesus and, for a moment, he too could do it till he took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink beneath the waves. And he would have drowned had not Jesus stretched out his hand and caught hold of him and got him back into the boat.

Take the miracles involving exorcism.

Whatever you may think lies at the root of madness, the man called Legion, who naked, haunted a cemetery on the edge of the Sea of Galilee in the land of the Gerasenes, was demon-possessed, not by just one but by a whole army of them. The unclean spirits knew who Jesus was but he ordered them to shut up and come out. It wasn't so good for the pigs which plunged into the water in a fit of madness. It didn't make Jesus popular with their owners or the locals or I guess with animal-lovers today. But to a world of spirits, who and what Jesus was, was clear without doubt.

But there is always a choice. You don't have to believe the evidence of your own eyes. Anything is open to interpretation and to those who refused to recognise Jesus, an exorcism was not carried out through the virtue embodied in him by God but by some unholy, satanic pact - Satan exorcising his own demons. Inconsistent nonsense but then what do you expect of those who could see but were blind to the truth?

Miracles were signs by which Jesus made himself known. When John the Baptist was plagued by doubt in prison, he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he really was the one John thought he was. Jesus points them to the evidence of what they've seen and heard: 'Blind people are seeing! Lame people are walking! People with virulent skin diseases are being cleansed! Deaf people can hear again! The dead are being raised to life!' These miracles are a check list of what you would expect of the Messiah.

So Jesus was a miracle worker in the tradition of our Jewish forebears: Elijah restoring the widow of Zarephath's son to life; Elisha curing Naaman of his leprosy. Jesus never used his power to save himself but the greatest miracle associated with him was to come after his death.



6 Prayer

'Teach us to pray, Master . . .' Luke 11 v1

Prayer. It's what I used to do all the time at synagogue. We met there for prayer, our souls connected to God. We swayed as we prayed, like candle flames, the rhythm of the words reflected, emphasised, by the rhythm of our movement.

What do you think of prayer? Are we simply talking to ourselves? Is it simply wishful-thinking, just a lot of empty-sounding, nice but pious nonsense?



Well, Jesus was serious about prayer. In the beginning, we had a fright: early one morning, he wasn't in the house where we were staying. The night before, he'd cured Simon Peter's mother-in-law, but before we were awake, he'd taken himself off to be alone to talk to God. And that was his pattern – regularly taking time to talk and listen to God.

There was a confidence about his prayer that was infectious. He said, 'Ask and it will be given to you! Search and you will find! Knock and the door will be opened for you! Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks has the door opened.' Pure common sense which he reinforced with the simple notion that when asked, no one would give their son a stone for bread or a snake for fish. Then how much more so our Father in heaven?

Four days after Lazarus had died, outside his tomb Jesus prayed. He thanked God for having answered his prayer before he prayed it! And the answer was Lazarus shuffling out into the light and we were impressed!

But for Jesus, prayer was not about showing off in public, a matter of standing on the corner of the street and drawing attention to yourself because you were being seen to pray. Prayer could be in public, in synagogue or in the Temple for example, but it was a question of approaching God, not to boast about how good we are but in humility, to recognise how good God is to whom we speak. Check out the parable of 'The Pharisee and the Tax Collector' which Luke retells – you'll love it.



So we asked him, 'Teach us to pray, Master.' And, of course, he did.

Our father in heaven,
may your name be honoured;
may your kingdom come;
may your will be done
as in heaven, so on earth.
Give us today the bread we need now;
and forgive us the things we owe,
as we too forgive what was owed to us.
Don't bring us into the great trial
but rescue us from evil.



Great. So what's that all about? Well really, it's an example of prayer for us all to follow. It's a template for us all to copy.

So what are the underlying principles? There are four: praise, saying sorry, saying thanks and asking for things.

Praise is adoration. It recognises God for who he is – our Father – and what he is – our God in heaven, our King on earth. We are identifying with him, asking that his will be our will so that we may be his instruments in helping to make his kingdom a present reality.

Saying sorry is confession, repentance. It's a recognition of where we are and what we need to do to be better. Here, it's encapsulated in the notion that we owe and are owed. We are in debt to God and to the people around us; some of them are in debt to us. So we ask for forgiveness, resolving, too, to be forgiving.

Saying thanks is gratitude. It's a recognition of what we have to be grateful for. It's us seeing that we are in debt for all we have been given, not least our life itself. Though it might be hard, we should be grateful for the bad things too because they could ultimately work for the good. To be honest, thanks is only implicit throughout this prayer, thanks that God is our Father, thanks that we do receive our daily bread, thanks that our wrong-doing is forgiven.

Asking is the hard one. We can ask for ourselves; we can ask for others. There is, as I've already indicated, the confidence that God will answer our requests but His answer may be yes, may be no, or may be not yet. The onus is on us to ask only for what is right, to realise that if we want to pass an exam, then God won't do the work for us but might give us the peace of mind so that the work we've already done will not be wasted by nerves.



That's the Lord's Prayer. You can use it as it is or use it to inform how you pray.

So what is prayer?

It's being connected to God:

talking to him;

listening to him;

being with him;

a life-time's dialogue.



7 Who do you say I am ?

'Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi.' Matthew 16 v13

Crunch time! Jesus pops the question. Who am I? Who do people say I am? Who do you say that I am?

Of course, we knew already. We'd need to be particularly sad or stupid – and often we were – not to know. Now I don't like to boast or anything but after just a couple of minutes of being with him for the very first time and hearing him, I knew who he was and, as you know, I was inspired to say as much.

But Jesus had to ask us because he wanted to share something important, something quite shocking, with us.



Mark places what went on half way through his gospel. Matthew two thirds of the way in. Luke about a third into his. John doesn't mention it at all.

According to Mark and Matthew, the incident takes place somewhere around Caesarea Philippi, a town set in the beautiful foothills of Mount Hermon, the main source of the Jordan.

So Jesus asks us who people think he is. No sweat. John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets – come back to life.

Then, he asks us, 'What about you?' Now Peter is a sharp act, quick-off-the-mark – you've got to give him that. Without a pause for breath, he says straight out: 'You're the Messiah'. So Jesus smiles at him and tells him he's inspired and promises him 'the keys to the kingdom'.

And we're all impressed till Jesus then tells us the bad news. What lies ahead of him. He's going to have to suffer. The Jewish authorities will target him, arrest him, have him executed but three days after his death, he will rise again from the dead.

You should have seen Peter's face. He was horrified. He actually takes Jesus to one side to read him the riot act. He tells Jesus that's so not going to happen to him! To him, God does not want anything bad to happen. No way!

Now it's Peter's turn to get his ear bashed by Jesus who's not best pleased with him. 'Get behind me, satan! You're trying to trip me up. You're not looking at things like God does! You're looking at things like an ordinary guy out there.'

Then Jesus tells us a hard truth. 'If anyone wants to come after me, they must give themselves up, and pick up their cross, and follow me. Yes: if someone wants to save his life, they must lose it; and if anyone loses their life for my sake, they will find it.' Now I know that the cross to which Jesus referred was literally the crosspiece, the beam of wood the condemned carried to his crucifixion, which was slotted into place on a fixed upright and later buried with him. As such, the cross not only came to symbolise our faith in Jesus as the Son of God but it also became a symbol of what willingly we would suffer for him.



I'm not sure that I really understand what exactly he was talking about then but I had an impression of what lay in front of me and it wasn't very nice.

And of course, later, I was to find out just what 'not very nice' would mean for me. I guess I must have been looking pretty serious and certainly Peter was looking pretty hurt, bruised by the way Jesus had talked to him. In fact, none of us were that happy. But what struck me was just how shocked and just how very disappointed one of our number looked at what we'd just heard. At the time, I didn't realise the significance of what I was seeing. But in the light of what was later to happen, I think I now know what that guy was thinking.

That man was Judas.



8 We have a problem

'What's all the fuss about?' Mark 9 v16

Now I'm not a jealous man. The 10th commandment is not the one I break first. But I felt miffed Jesus had taken Peter, James and John up the mountain with him to pray, leaving us down here below to deal with the people.

Later, on the quiet, the three told us what had happened on Mount Hermon. I just wish I'd been there for myself – to have seen Moses and Elijah with my own eyes! I just wish I'd seen Jesus transfigured like an angel in robes of shining white! I just wish I'd heard the voice of God from the cloud declaring to them, 'This is my son, the one I love. Listen to him!' Just my luck. But honestly, I don't envy them – much!



To begin with, we'd been there on our own. Left alone, it felt like a holiday. But we weren't left alone that long. Word got round that Jesus was here – which he wasn't. But they didn't know that and they wanted to see him; they wanted to hear him; they wanted him to heal them.

It didn't help that not everyone who'd come was on our side. For a start, there were some 'experts' in the Law who'd come to check us out. What was I just saying about the 10th commandment – how some people view other people's success?

It didn't help that there were too many people for us to handle. Now, if there'd been just one person to heal and we'd been on our own in a quiet place, then we might have managed. Now, if they'd just come just one at a time, then we might have had space and time to sort out their problems. But they were crowding round us, wanting, needing, demanding and we simply couldn't cope – we were overwhelmed.

It didn't help that there was a father who was clearly losing the plot. Who could blame him? His son, his only boy, was an epileptic – he regularly suffered fits. His father was distraught as he told us his boy had been like it from birth and he was lucky to have survived till now. It seemed he had some kind of demon. Demon-possession was part of how we made sense of our world. And here was a nasty case. In a fit, the child became speechless and deaf, unable to articulate a word, his teeth clenched together, his tongue in danger of being bitten off. He'd fall down to the ground writhing, foaming at the mouth. With no care for the boy's safety in such a fit, his demon might try to throw him into the fire or water if any were near-at-hand. Not good! No wonder the father was upset. He was at his wit's end.

So when we couldn't deliver, it was the father's turn to throw a fit. He completely lost it and started shouting at us. Transferred guilt or what? Making us feel guilty that he felt guilty that he couldn't help his son, the boy he loved.

And didn't those legal eagles love it? It was just what they'd come to find out – that we were useless, frauds, intent on conning people.

Then Jesus came down from the mountain.



As soon as the crowd caught sight of him coming towards us, they left us and ran to him, the boy's father in the lead.

What was all the fuss about Jesus wanted to know. And the man told him. We were useless. We couldn't help his boy. And the father told Jesus what was what.

What was odd was the pained expression on Jesus' face. As we later heard, he had been on a real high and now he had come down-to-earth with a bump. And the crowd fell quiet under the weight of his exasperation. 'How long am I still going to be with such a faithless generation? Don't you people realise that if you have the faith then nothing is impossible?'

The father blushed. He was upset but he knew that he was in the wrong. And when Jesus asks him the direct question, 'Do you believe I can heal your son?', his answer almost made me want to hug him. 'I want to but I need your help to.'

So Jesus commands the demon to come out of the boy. And now it's the demon's turn to be upset. He throws the boy down on the ground in a fit and leaves him there for dead. But he isn't – though he really looks like it, lying motionless on the floor.

And like the best stories, this one has a happy ending. For the first time in his life, the boy is normal, his father's prayers are answered and faith is rewarded. The crowd is impressed. Our reputation restored. Our critics silent.



But when at last we're on our own, we ask Jesus why we couldn't exorcise the boy's demon. And he says simply this sort can only be done by prayer.

So we'd got it wrong again – but in the circumstances, understandable perhaps?



9 Off on our own

'Jesus called the Twelve, and began to send them out in pairs.' Mark 6 v7

Memory is a strange thing. Over time, it's possible to remember things in a different order. With four gospels, you have four memories at play. John places the clean-up of the Temple at the start of Jesus' ministry; the other three at the end. Who to believe? And what about the mission of the Twelve, the time when Jesus sends us out on a practice-run as apprentice apostles? John doesn't mention it. Mark and Matthew place it well before while Luke places it just before Peter's confession, Jesus' Transfiguration and the healing of the demon-possessed, epileptic boy. But I think they got it wrong. As far as I can remember, I thought it happened *after* not *before* these three things – logical really if you think about it. It was then that Jesus first gave us space to try out what we could do in faith and prayer.



We were sent off in pairs. There were twelve of us, one each for each of the Tribes of Israel. There was Simon whom Jesus named Peter (the rock) and his brother, Andrew; James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John, both of whom Jesus nicknamed Boanerges (sons of thunder); me and Philip; Thomas and Matthew, the tax collector; James, the son of Alphaeus, and Judas Thaddaeus, aka Jude; Simon the Cananaean, aka 'the hothead', and Judas Iscariot who turned traitor by handing Jesus over to the priests.

Jesus gave us clear instructions. We were to preach the gospel and to heal the sick – and he empowered us to do so. We were to travel light, taking just the bare essentials: no change of clothes; no money; no food; simply a staff in our hand and sandals on our feet to help us to get about. We were to stay with people where we found ourselves, accepting their hospitality while we were there. If we were not well received, then we should leave without a fuss: it would be their loss and ultimately count against them.

We left with his blessing. It was the day after the Sabbath. We were to go our separate ways and then come back, having spent one Sabbath away to return on the eve of the following Sabbath – fourteen days physically apart from him but with him in spirit.

While we were gone, Jesus would spend the time alone in prayer.



We were sent off in pairs. Peter went with Andrew; James with John; Matthew with Judas – they shared a certain skill with money. I went with Philip.

It was good to be alone with Philip again. It was good to be with him and to share the excitement of doing something as a pair. We had an exciting truth to share: that Jesus was the Son of God, our long-expected Messiah who had been sent into the world to cleanse us, God's children, from the impurity of our wrong-doing and to restore us as righteous in God's sight.

It wasn't easy. The first time I spoke to people about Jesus, our faith in him, my heart was in my mouth. But practice makes perfect – 10,000 hours spent on anything will do the trick – so in the fortnight Philip and I spent away from Jesus, we did get better about speaking to people about what we knew to be true. By a village well; in a town's synagogue; in a family's home – the words we needed seemed to come and honestly, no one could doubt our enthusiasm for what we felt.

It wasn't easy. The first time I tried to heal someone, I was nervous, uncertain, unsure. I pictured Jesus in my mind. In his name, I prayed to our Father. I asked that the fire of the Spirit might flow through me to heal this sick child in front of me. I placed my hands on the boy's head. I felt the healing power flow, tingling down from the top of my head and through my arms. My hands felt warm as something seemed to flow from me to the boy. All was well.

People were mostly kind to us. They were interested in what we had to say. They were astonished at what we did. And for what we said and what we did, they looked after us: the food was simple, the sleeping-space shared, the hospitality open and warm.

In that time we spent apart from Jesus, we both grew up. We were now more fully a part of him, his plan, God's plan for us.



11 Mary of Bethany

'The house was filled with the smell of the perfume.' John 12 v3

Mary, Martha and Lazarus were our friends, all three good friends of Jesus. They lived in Bethany, a small village, a couple miles from the Mount of Olives due west of Jerusalem.

Mary was a dreamer – she loved to sit and think. Martha was practical, full of energy – she loved to be busy about the house. Lazarus was not a well man – otherwise, surely, he would have been one of us, one of the Twelve.



Once, Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him speaking about Our Father and the coming of the Kingdom. Martha was working hard in the kitchen to prepare our food. Overwhelmed by the pressure and unfairness of it all, Martha complains to Jesus that he should tell her sister to stop sitting there and come and give her a hand.

Not good. Both women have a point with Jesus in the middle. But with the wisdom of Solomon, he affirms both: 'Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things. Only one thing matters. Mary has chosen the best part, and it's not going to be taken away from her.'

Pure diplomacy. He recognises the worth of what Martha is doing, all her very real effort for us, but at the same time, he affirms too the value of Mary being still and attentive to the Word of God.

And yes – we did eat well that night.



News came that Lazarus was unwell. We were not surprised but we knew everything would be all right. Then we heard he'd died and we were shocked. With a troubled, heavy heart, we went together to Bethany and there, as you know, Jesus did something extraordinary.

We went to the tomb where Lazarus had been laid and Jesus ordered the stone to be removed. Understandably, Martha was not happy – in a climate like ours, after four days his body would already be decomposing so the smell would not be nice. But Jesus told them to do it anyway, and he prays to God, thanking him for having answered his prayer!

Jesus then commands Lazarus to come out. And to our shock and amazement, our friend stumbles out of his tomb, his body encumbered in the grave clothes wrapped round him.



The Saturday night in question we were staying in Bethany before going up to Jerusalem for Passover. It was natural to stay with them. As usual, Martha had prepared the food and Lazarus sat with us at table.

Then something extraordinary, extravagant happened – an act of generous love. Without warning, without telling anyone first, Mary took some expensive perfume and anointed Jesus' feet and the fragrance filled their home.

Jesus remained still, his face calm, beautiful, radiant in the light of the lamps in the room, as gently, reverently, Mary massaged the scent of the ointment into his feet. It was a selfless act of love, a public recognition of just how special we all knew this man to be. A verse from Isaiah sprang to mind –

‘How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news’.

And Jesus' feet, his spotless soles upturned, were rendered more beautiful by Mary's anointing love.

But one of us was not a happy man. As Judas spoke, I looked at his face and you could see just how angry he was. In the tone of his voice, you could hear his real irritation. That such valuable perfume could be so carelessly wasted! ‘Why wasn't this ointment sold? It would have fetched a year's wages! You could have given it to the poor!’

Of course, he was right. He did have a point. What he said was true. But, at the same time, he was profoundly wrong. All Judas could see was how much the perfume had been worth to him, not how much Jesus was worth to us. He simply

did not value Mary's love for Jesus; Judas only loved the money which he looked after for us.

But Jesus puts him in his place. 'Let her alone. She's been keeping it for the day of my burial! You always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me.'

And there we had it. A restatement of the awful truth we knew. That our time with Jesus was limited. That we had come up to Jerusalem not just for Passover but for the end-game too. We were all sad, all sobered by the thought. All that is but one.

At that moment, Judas I guess had ceased to be one of us. From that moment, Judas I guess had made up his mind to do what he must do - to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

And if you had the eyes to see and the mind to read a man's face, then you might have guessed what was going to happen too.



12 Palm Sunday

'The crowds . . . shouted out, 'Hosanna now to David's Son'.' Matthew 21 v9

On the first day of the week, we entered Jerusalem with Jesus. Though we did not know it at the time, we'd just entered our last week with him before his death on the cross.



We left Bethany on foot. Nothing unusual in that. We went everywhere on foot. What was unusual was that Jesus told Philip and me to go over to a village across the way and to bring him back the young donkey we would find tied up there. If we were challenged, we were to say, 'Because the Master needs him.'

'The Master needs him' – why? What earthly reason could he have for wanting us to fetch him a donkey? The journey from Bethany up to Jerusalem was less than an hour. Why did he want a donkey, one that no one had ridden before? What was in his mind?

What was in ours were questions. Would we find the donkey as he said? Would anyone try to stop us? Would they accept the words Jesus told us to say? Would we be accused of stealing? We had learnt to trust Jesus over the three years we'd been with him. Our hearts were his. But at the back of our minds lurked a shadow of doubt.

We didn't talk as we walked to the village but we were glad there were two of us, that we weren't doing this on our own. And sure enough, there was the colt just as Jesus said it would be. So we did as we'd been told. We untied it. And sure enough people from the village asked us what we were up to. So we told them, 'Because the Master needs it.' And they smiled at us and let us lead the donkey away.



When our friends saw us bringing the donkey back, I could sense their sense of excitement. To make Jesus more comfortable on the donkey's back, we improvised a saddle for him to sit on, some spare clothing we didn't need to wear on so hot a morning.

Off we set, excited to be going up to Jerusalem for Passover, Pesach, the time we had been freed from slavery in Egypt. God was our God and once, kings of the house of David had ruled his people from here under his authority. We had been free from foreign rule in the past. Could now be the time that Jesus was going to set us free again?

As we made our way together up towards the eternal city, our sense of excitement was palpable, contagious. Riding on a donkey, surrounded by his twelve disciples singing psalms of joy, our Master presented an image the meaning of which was not lost on the pilgrims who saw us.

Slowly, gradually, spontaneously, the crowd began to join in our singing. Some broke off palm branches from the trees near the road to wave them in the air. Some took off their outer garments to lay them on the road in front of the donkey as a mark of respect. And a shout went up:

‘Hosanna now to David’s Son!

God’s blessing on the coming one –

The one who comes in the Lord’s own name!

Hosanna in the highest!’

But not everyone shared our joy. For a start, Judas looked as if his mind was elsewhere. I thought he was still smarting about being contradicted by Jesus in front of us. And some Pharisees were openly miffed by the noisy procession. Not simply by the noise of people enjoying themselves, making a fuss of a well known preacher, a wandering teacher, a respected miracle worker from Galilee but also by what they were saying. To call Jesus David’s Son was to recognise him as the Messiah. But a Messiah who came in peace. That was what he was saying by choosing to ride a donkey. To ride a horse would have been a sign he had come to fight. Whatever, not good in their eyes, given what the Pharisees already thought of him.

So they told him to tell the crowd to shut up. But Jesus shut them up instead by telling them that if the crowd were to be silent, then the stones themselves would sing for joy. They were not pleased. And so we entered Jerusalem and took the next step on the journey whose destination was written in stone.



13 Cleaning up the Temple

'Jesus . . . threw out all the people who were buying and selling.' Matthew 21 v12

That afternoon, we went up to the House of the Lord on the Temple mount. And Jesus did not like what he saw. He stood there, looking round him, clearly not a happy man.



The Temple was our third Temple on this site. The first, built by Solomon, David's son, was finally destroyed when Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians and Nebuchadnezzar sent our people into exile in Babylon. On their return, the second was built by Zerubbabel with the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah, later to be rebuilt and refurbished into what was to become the third temple complex. That was the work of Herod the Great and the building, by our standards at the time, was magnificent. It would later be destroyed by the Romans when they crushed a Jewish revolt against their rule.

Bethel, the house of the Lord. At its heart, the presence of the Lord, Adonai, ever present in the Holy of Holies – the inner sanctuary, the sacred place where once the Ark of the Covenant had rested in the dark. None might enter in except the High Priest, a rope round his waist to pull him out should the need arise. But even he could only go there but once a year in order to burn incense on Yom Kippur, the Black Fast, the Day of Atonement after first having been ritually purified.

Outside in front, the Court of Priests where on the altar, a perfect double cube, priests daily made sacrifice and burnt incense there, their prayers rising up to Him whom we, as Jews, dare not name. Even from the outer courts, the altar was visible albeit in the distance. To prove they were fit enough still to be of service, priests had to negotiate a low wall which separated the Court of Priests from the Court of Men, where only the circumcised adult male, twelve-years-old or more, true Sons of the Law, might enter; where only the fit and the healthy, whole of body and in mind, might come to worship. Beyond lay the Court of Women, where our women might worship, separate from our men who were forbidden to walk through the centre of the Court but had to pass around the edge. There twelve horns stood ready to receive freewill offerings. To a fine-tuned ear, the tinkle of a widow's mite had more weight than the cascade from a rich man's purse. Beyond the Court of Gentiles, where all were free to congregate. It was here now we stood.



If you were standing there, what would you see and hear? People, crowds of people; hustle and bustle; movement; noise as people talk and shout, buy and sell. There are stalls where people sell you birds and animals – pigeons, doves and lambs – all guaranteed in perfect condition, perfect for sacrifice with no chance a priest would ever reject them as not good enough to be offered up. All is for a price. And to pay for them and to pay the annual Temple tax, your everyday coinage, the Roman denarius, has to be changed into shekels, the only valid currency for transactions in the Temple. All is at a price; all costs. And the cost is exorbitant.

The traders all work for Ananias, the former High Priest, whose family enjoy the rights to regulate the trade in the Court of the Gentiles. So there is money for him; money for them; money for the Temple itself. And who pays? You do. Inflated prices and sharp practices all mean you, the pilgrim, you, the devout Jew, are being ripped off big time. Everyone knows it; no one can do anything about it. Capitalism, monopolies and sharp business practice are nothing new.

As Jesus stood there, what did he feel? Disgust? Outrage? Righteous indignation? To him, it felt the place had become like a robbers' cave, a place haunted by those who preyed on pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to pray. Bandits lying in wait there on the Jericho road; bandits standing round here, taking your money. It wasn't right. The Temple was the most sacred place in Judaism, the place where God was present, the place where we should feel the presence of God. It was here we could fulfil the ritual obligations of our faith. It was here we could come to pray, to talk to Him, to hear Him speak to us. Of course, the further in you went, the fewer people qualified for admission. If you were a Gentile, you were restricted to this large area where we were. And it had been turned into a marketplace and shortcut, so busy and noisy, how could you possibly discern the sacred silence in this secular scrum? Absolutely no chance. So Jesus was angry: angry on behalf of his fellow Jews who were being exploited; angry on behalf of the Gentiles who were being deprived here of even the little they had.

I'd seen Jesus angry before. The time he told Peter off. The time he rebuked Judas. The time he had argued with the Pharisees in Synagogue about whether or

not it was right to heal on the Sabbath. But this time it was different. He was incandescent, burning with zeal for our Father and for His people, all His people, who were being prevented from finding and meeting Him in this sacred place by the abuse he was witnessing.

So what did he do? He turned his anger on the sellers of animal sacrifice and the money changers, overturning their tables and turning them out of the House of God. The people cheered and the guards surprisingly did nothing. It was as if Jesus' anger had reflected the latent anger of the crowd. It was as if Jesus was protected. We know now that his time had not yet come. But soon it would.



The point was clear to those in authority. Jesus had thrown down a direct challenge to them. He had come to the centre of their power over the people and had demonstrated by what he did that what they did was wrong. It was not a situation that could be tolerated for long if the priests wished to remain in charge.

The battle-lines were drawn.



14 Three days in Jerusalem

'By what right do you do these things?' Mark 11 v28

The next three days, we divided our time between Bethany and Jerusalem: spending a lot of time in the Temple itself; finding space to be alone in the Garden of Gethsemane near the Mount of Olives.

The Jewish authorities were out to catch Jesus out if they could.



Opposition had come from different groups at different times in different places. In Galilee, it had largely been from the Pharisees. To be a Pharisee was to have a certain mindset, legalistic, nit-picking, following the letter of the law in practice as precisely as possible. To tithe was to give God a tenth of everything, even of your herbs! They were self-righteous, small-minded, good on minutiae but blind to the bigger picture. They were obsessed with ritual cleanliness and with keeping the Sabbath holy, wholly work-free. To them, the Law was literally binding on their thoughts and deeds.

There had been a potential threat from Herod Antipas. He had removed John the Baptist and now Herod seemed ill-at-ease with the voice that filled the silence after John's beheading.

In Jerusalem, the priests held sway. Once, in the Temple, a woman caught in the very act of adultery was dragged before Jesus for judgement. A great trap that.

The Law of Moses was quite clear – stoning to death – but given Jesus was known to be compassionate, it was thought he'd be soft on her and so he could be accused of not taking the Law seriously. But Jesus remained silent till pressed when he simply said, 'Whichever of you is without sin should throw the first stone.' And they had the grace to leave shame-faced, one-by-one. But what made me smile at the time was if she'd been caught at it, where was the man? Nice one!



You have to give them credit: their questions were good, well thought out to catch him out but of course they didn't – no chance!

The chief priests, the experts in the Jewish Law and the elders of the people came to question Jesus about his authority to act the way he did. Good one given what he'd done the previous day. 'By what right do you do these things? Who gave you the right to do them?'

Jesus answers their question by framing a question of his own. If they answer his, then he'll answer theirs. And so he asks, 'Was the baptism of John from heaven, or was it a human invention? What's your answer?'

Very clever. If they state it was from God, then Jesus can ask them why they took no notice. If they say it was human invention, then they will alienate the people who recognised John as a prophet. Between a rock and a hard place, they refuse to answer so neither does Jesus need to answer theirs.

If he'd told them the truth, that his authority was, like that of John, God-given, they would not have believed him and they would have been happy to accuse him of blasphemy. But if they'd been listening carefully to what was implied, then they might have heard his unspoken answer. Posing a question about John's authority is to tell them the source of his own.

The question about paying tax was excellent. It is put by some Pharisees in the company of some Herodians. Strange bedfellows these who would not normally be seen dead in each other's company. But then needs must when . . . 'Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar?' Say yes and Jesus will alienate the people; say no and he can be charged with stirring up civil unrest. Not having any money, Jesus asks to see a coin with which the tax is paid. They show him a Roman denarius and Jesus asks whose image is on it. Caesar's! So Jesus can say, 'Give Caesar back what belongs to Caesar and give God back what belongs to God.' A breathtaking response which leaves them speechless.

The question 'Whose wife a seven-times widow would be in heaven?' is a little academic but it came from the Sadducees whose name says it all – really. It's a technical test question aimed to show that the idea of resurrection, of life after death, is silly. It involves a woman who successively marries seven brothers all of whom die without children. When the woman too dies, whose wife will she be in the after-life? Jesus' answer is sharp and to the point. He tells them that they have no idea and little understanding. Heaven is not like earth where folk are married. The proof of life after death lies rather in the fact that God says He is

the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Since God is a God of the living not of the dead, then these patriarchs though once dead are now necessarily alive.

The question 'Which Law is the most important?' is sincere. Framed by an expert in the Law, it is a genuine question which allows Jesus to express what is truly at the heart of the Torah: Love of God and Love of Neighbour. The expert agrees and Jesus pays him this complement: 'You are not far from God's kingdom'.



His teaching during these three days was sharp, pointed – parables, a stream of them: 'The Tenants'; 'The Wedding Feast'; 'The Wise and Wicked Slaves'; 'The Wise and Foolish Girls'; 'The Talents'; 'The Sheep and the Goats'. They are thinly veiled criticism of a failure of those who should know better to respond to the Love of God, preferring to go their own way rather than obeying God's will for them, of being unprepared, neglectful, failing to act wisely with compassion.

No wonder those in authority wanted to have Jesus removed from the scene – permanently!



That Wednesday we talked about the end times.

What started it off was one of us admiring the Temple and Jesus predicting its destruction which, as we now know, was to happen. Then Jesus told us about the end times: wars; rumours of wars; earthquakes; famines. We would be persecuted and there would be a collapse of family values. When the time came, people should get out into the countryside without delay. Then false prophets would pretend to be him but before his actual return, there would be series of natural phenomena: the light of the sun and the moon eclipsed and meteorites falling on earth from heaven. The end will come but no one knows when except God our Father. So we should be prepared.



Now the stage was set for the final act – but not as final as the authorities had intended.



15 The Last Supper

'This is my body.' Mark 14 v22

Where to eat our Passover meal? Back in Bethany? Jesus had other plans. Where else but Jerusalem?

Philip and I were told to get the room ready. We were to follow a man carrying a water pot into the house he entered and ask to be shown to the large, upper room, set aside for us. In Jerusalem, thronging with pilgrims, in this quiet, safe space, we were to prepare everything for nightfall.

It was as he said it would be and we did as we were told. And if you're wondering how we could spot the right person in a crowded city then you know nothing of Jewish men. Carrying water pots is women's work; no self-respecting man would be seen doing so except the one we were meant to see and follow.



Before we sat down to eat, Jesus washed our feet.

To say we were surprised is an understatement. Washing someone's feet is a menial task. In Cana, in my father's house, when a guest arrived to dine with us, one of our servants would wash their feet. Not surprising given we live in a country where roads are dusty and wearing sandals means our feet will get covered in dust.

Imagine our surprise when Jesus takes off his outer garment and, taking a bowl of water and a towel, squats down to wash our feet. Of course, one of us should have thought of doing it. But we didn't. I guess we were all too preoccupied or thought too highly of our own self-importance. But Jesus was teaching us a lesson in humility and we blushed at how, after all this time with him, we still fell short of the standards he set for us, for him.

Without embarrassment on his part, he calmly does what is necessary and when it comes to my turn, I'm touched by just how much I feel he cares for me. For me, he's prepared to get down on his knees and with the same hands that have healed so many, he touches me, gently washing the dust off my feet with his fingers and the palms of his hands. I feel the warmth of his love flush through my body and I blush at what he, my Master and my friend, has come to mean to me.

But Peter hated the idea. He knew who and what Jesus was. He knew who and what he, Peter, was. And horrified, Peter wanted none of it. Jesus was gently firm with him, told him that, in truth, it was needful. So Peter asked Jesus to wash not just his feet but all of him. But smiling encouragingly, Jesus replied there was no need since only Peter's feet were dirty enough to need washing.

Less than a week ago, Mary had anointed Jesus' feet with perfume. This evening, Jesus used water. But the effect on us was extraordinary. We felt cherished. How good to be valued by one we respect. How good to be loved by one we hold dear.



At table, we took our places to eat, John next to Jesus. We ate and drank and talked and it was good to be together.

Then Jesus told us that one of us was going to betray him. Now we know but then we didn't. Each of us was deeply uneasy that Jesus might be pointing the finger at us.

Then Jesus did something special, something that has come to mean so much to us as Christians. First, he took the unleavened bread, blessed it, broke it, then said, 'Take it. This is my body.' Passing the bread round the table we each ate a piece. Then he took the cup of wine blessed it and gave it to us with these words, 'This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many'. Passing the cup round, we each drank a sip. And what it meant then and what that means now is open to speculation and much debate.

After that, we sang a hymn then left to go out into the night in the direction of the Mount of Olives across the Kidron then up into our special, private place in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But one of us was no longer with us when we left.



16 Arrested

They 'arrested Jesus and tied him up.' John 18 v12

That night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, they came to arrest Jesus.

Gethsemane in Aramaic means an oil press and in the garden so named, there were some ancient olive trees – understandable really given its location near the Mount of Olives. It was our private place to which we could withdraw from the noise of the city. It was our secure place, known only to us. Here we felt safe.



When we got there, we were already tired out. It had been a good but long day. Jesus took the Three further into the Garden and left what was left of the Twelve by the entrance in the dark where we had little choice but to snatch some sleep wherever we could. With us was a lad, the son of the house where we'd just eaten together, who'd simply tagged along as we left.

According to Peter, James and John, Jesus needed to be alone. But he told them to stay awake and to keep watch while he went further in to pray. Jesus was not a happy man. He wanted to be sure that the cup of suffering (his words) that he was about to drink, was in fact God's will for him. By this time, Peter, James and John, like us, were totally exhausted. Waiting in the dark, could they stay awake? Now Jesus was alone with God; alone, knowing what was about to happen to him; alone with the thought of the pain to come – mental, physical, spiritual,

emotional. Without his friends, the cup was his alone to drink. No wonder three times he found them sleeping. In truth he was alone.

When he woke them for the third time, he looked dreadful, his face covered in sweat as if he'd been literally sweating blood. He told them to get up: the hour had come and they came back to us just as we were getting to our feet, disturbed by armed men with torches entering the Garden. In front of this detachment of Temple guards, pointing the way to them, was our friend, Judas. As was the custom among our people at the time, Judas went straight up to Jesus to greet him with a kiss.

It was his signal to them. The guards stepped forward to grab Jesus. Peter drew a sword he'd recently acquired and with a glancing blow cut off the left ear of one of them. Jesus' voice stopped everyone in their tracks. He told Peter to put away his sword and promptly healed the man's ear. Then turning on the soldiers, he said, 'Am I a criminal that you come to arrest me like a thief in the night? You could have arrested me any time while I taught in the Temple during the day. But let God's will be done.'

And it was. They arrested him. In panic, we fled. We ran away, out into the dark. At first the boy was slow to move. One of the guards grabbed him but with the agility of youth, he twisted and turned and slipped naked from the man's grasp, leaving his loose cotton garment boyless in the man's hand.



In the dark, I found Philip and with him found the terrified boy. We covered him with one of our garments and together took him back to his mother's house to wait for the following day.

In the meantime, at a distance, Peter was following the men leading Jesus away.



In a garden, long ago, a man had betrayed God by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil offered to him. In a garden, here and now, a man had betrayed the Son of God with a kiss, by accepting the silver offered to him.



17 Night at the High Priest's

'They took Jesus away to the high priest.' Mark 14 v53

Earlier that night, Jesus had said that one of us would betray him and that all of us would desert him. Straightaway, Peter swore never to leave him whatever we might do. Calmly, sadly, Jesus told him that before the second cock crow, he, Peter, would deny him three times.

When we ran away scared into the night, true-to-his-word, Peter did follow Jesus. When Jesus was taken into the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest, and brought before the hastily assembled court inside, Peter waited outside in the courtyard.

Of course, I wasn't there. I heard what happened later.



The Great Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, met in Jerusalem. Most of its 71 members were from Jerusalem or from Judea. We were from Galilee – outsiders by definition. And Jesus came from Nazareth – ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’

The Sanhedrin hears several witnesses testify against Jesus. The charges are invented and inconsistent; fabricated fiction; at best, truth at a tangent; at worst, lies. They say, ‘we heard him say “I will destroy this Temple, which human hands have made and in three days I’ll build another, made without human hands.”’

The High Priest invites Jesus to answer the accusations made against him. Jesus remains silent.



Outside, in the courtyard, Peter is drawn by the light and warmth of the fire to squat down on the edge of a circle of servants, waiting for their masters inside to leave.

A serving girl in the household of the High Priest notices Peter sitting there, warming himself. Looking more closely at him, she challenges him: ‘You were with Jesus the Nazarene too, weren’t you?’

Instinctively, in self-defence, Peter replies, ‘I don’t know what on earth you’re talking about.’ No longer comfortable in the warmth of the fire, he gets up and goes out into the forecourt. The cock crows for the first time to announce the approach of dawn.



The High Priest asks Jesus a direct question, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’

Jesus replies, ‘I AM and you will see “the son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming in clouds of heaven”.’

Horrified, Caiaphas ceremonially rips his priestly robe. He has heard Jesus speak the name of God. To him, to us, said in a certain way in a certain context, 'I AM', is the name of God told to Moses at the Burning Bush. And so he shouts, 'Why do we need any more evidence? You heard the blasphemy! What's your verdict?'

With one voice, they all agree Jesus deserves to die.



The same serving girl sees Peter hanging around the forecourt and for a second time, she voices her doubts about him, this time to the people who are just standing around doing nothing. She persists, claiming 'This man is one of them.'

For a second time, Peter rubbishes what she's said.



Some spit at him. Jesus is blindfolded and hit while others taunt him by shouting, 'Now prophesy!' Servants then take Jesus away and beat him up.



Meanwhile, one of the men standing in the forecourt says to Peter, 'You really are one of them, aren't you? You're a Galilean!'

Upset, frightened, backed into a corner, Peter loses it and says a little too loudly, a little too vehemently, 'I don't know this man you're talking about!'

At that very moment, the cock crows for the second time. Dawn is at hand but for Peter all is black – he stumbles out into what's left of the night, blinded by his own tears.



In truth, this night is all about being on the inside or being on the outside; about being an insider or being an outsider.

Jesus has been condemned because of who he is – he is not one of them. In their eyes, he is a wandering rabbi, a trouble-maker from Galilee who has become too popular for his own good, their good, a direct challenge to their authority. Jesus must be silenced. Their justification – blasphemy.

Peter is accused of being one of them, which is simply their way of saying that he is not one of us. Peter's accent gives him away – he has an unmistakable Galilean twang to the way he speaks Aramaic. His denial drives him out into the night. They're right – he's not one of them and having denied Jesus three times, he's not one of us either.



18 On trial

'They bound Jesus and took him off to Pilate.' Mark 15 v1

What I write next – Jesus before Pilate – I've pieced together from what I heard. I wasn't there. I didn't hear Jesus accused. I didn't see how Pilate handled his case. I didn't witness the Roman soldiers play with him. Details may differ, depending on whose gospel you read, but this is fact: those in authority handed our Messiah, God's Son, over to the Romans who, under pressure, sentenced him to death and crucified him.



It's really early in the morning. The Priests waste no time in hauling Jesus up before Pilate. They want things settled before the Sabbath; they want things done and dusted before Passover. They accuse Jesus of fomenting unrest; of encouraging non-payment of taxes to Rome; of claiming that he, Jesus, not Caesar, is their true and only king. Such sedition would merit the death penalty. His blasphemy, however, is not mentioned. They know a Roman Governor would not be interested in such a thing: it would carry no weight with him. Their real grievance with Jesus is not aired. Instead, substituted charges of dubious validity are raised which could merit his death.

Pilate questions Jesus who is silent till asked 'Are you the king of the Jews?' but he goes no further than to say that the words are Pilate's. Pilate offers a 'get-out-of-jail-free-card', his annual prisoner amnesty at Passover. The crowd can choose who to release: Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus Barabbas? They shout for

Barabbas. They shout for a son of a father rather than the Son of the Father. But what should happen to Jesus? They shout, 'Crucify him!' Who is in the crowd that morning outside Pilate's I don't exactly know but they are certainly not the people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with such enthusiasm less than a week ago. Perhaps they are the priests' men who take up the shout and others follow suit. I don't know. But the High Priest has got what he wanted.

Sitting on the judgement seat, Pilate ceremoniously washes his hands of the case. He pronounces judgement. Sentenced to death, Jesus is taken down to be prepared for his execution. The preparation includes stripping him, whipping him, dressing him up as a king and crowning him with a crown of thorns. Prisoner abuse: the sorts of things sadists enjoy doing to people in their power, to people at their mercy – helpless, hopeless.

Then they lead Jesus out through the streets and out of the city to the hill where he will be crucified, Golgotha, Calvary, the place of the skull. On his way, carrying the heavy wood from which he is to hang, Jesus stumbles three times. A passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, is press-ganged into carrying it for him. By now, Jesus is totally exhausted but the soldiers wouldn't want him to die before he got there and spoil their fun.

Eventually, they arrive and the crucifixion can begin.



There was no love lost between Pilate and the Jewish authorities. Understandably prejudiced, distrustful, each had a deep-rooted contempt of the other. It is fuelled by Pilate's appropriation of Temple funds for public works; by his heavy-handed policing in which pilgrims were killed; by subsequent Jewish complaints to Rome about Pilate's administration. Their accusation, if you free Jesus then 'you are no friend of Caesar', is nothing less than a threat to have him dismissed.

The only reason that the Jewish authorities took Jesus to Pilate was they lacked the legal authority to execute Jesus. They could have had him killed - had him taken out and stoned to death as they were to do with Stephen. But Jesus was popular with the people and there might be a backlash from the crowd if they were seen to have been high-handed, if Jesus' blood was on their hands. So, to follow the due process of the law at that time, they had to hand Jesus over to Pilate.

Pilate is seen as reluctant to condemn Jesus. Many believe that he judged Jesus to be innocent. Most people think that he tried to save Jesus by allowing the people to choose whom to save. And Pilate does wash his hands in public - a nice Jewish gesture that from a Roman. But when a judge sentences a man to death whom he considers innocent, what has happened to the principle of justice?

In truth, what we are seeing is transferred guilt: each blames the other. In truth, what we have is a case of universal guilt: in part, we are all responsible, me included, for abandoning God in the person of his Son, Jesus the Christ.



19 On the cross

'They crucified him there.' Luke 23 v33

They stripped him. They nailed him to the cross. They left him there to die. And die he does, before the end of the same day.

Tradition puts the seven last words of Jesus, cumulatively found in the four gospels, together to form one act of devotion - 'The Seven Last Words'. My account of the crucifixion follows this pattern.

And yes, I was there. Not close, like John, Mary his mother, and some of the women, close enough for Jesus to speak to them. But I was there with Philip. Word had come where and what was happening to Jesus so we hurried there and stood some way off. And what we saw was not nice.



'Father, forgive them! They don't know what they're doing!' Luke 23 v34

When they come to Calvary, Simon of Cyrene puts the cross down. The soldiers take Jesus' clothes from him and make him lie down, arms apart, feet together. Promptly, efficiently, they nail him to the cross, then hoist him up into the air and plant the cross firmly, securely into its socket in the ground.

And Jesus prays for them, prays that they might be forgiven for what they are doing to him. They do not know what they are doing. Not true in one sense since

these men are professionals; they know exactly what they are about and that they are about to execute someone. But true in another sense since they have no idea who it is that they are in the process of killing. If they had, then they ought to have been seriously worried.

But even here, in pain, Jesus demonstrates his compassion and concern are for all.



'I'm telling you the truth, you'll be with me in paradise, this very day.' Luke23 v43

Jesus is being mocked from all sides. Easy abuse from those who dislike him, who get pleasure mocking him when he's defenceless, vulnerable. And one of the two criminals, being crucified alongside him, joins in their mockery. I guess he may get some relief from gloating, knowing there's someone worse off even than him. But the other criminal tells him he's out-of-order because though they may deserve their punishment, Jesus doesn't – he's an innocent man.

And this man's reward – Jesus promises him a place in paradise. Jesus recognises this man's compassion, that even at the last, a criminal can have a change-of-heart; that no one is beyond redemption; anyone, anywhere, at any time, can in theory be saved. In practice, this man is.



'Mother. Look! There's your son.' **'Look! There's your mother.'** John 19 v26 & 27

John and Mary are at the foot of the cross. Even here Jesus is mindful of their welfare. Speaking first to his mother, Jesus points her to the disciple he especially loved, committing her to John's love and care. And Jesus says the same to John, committing him to his mother's care and love. Mary, the mother of God's Son, will now be John's adopted mother and John her adopted son. John is now in fact one of Jesus' brothers – the one into whose care he gives their mother.

From now on, each is there for the other and it is no coincidence that John's gospel is the most spiritually reflective of the four.



'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? My God my God why did you abandon me?'

Mark 15 v34

His cry, when it comes, is heart-rending. Now Jesus is truly alone, really on his own among those who surround him. As a scapegoat, Jesus is naked, nailed to his cross, hanging up in the air in a type of no man's land, in the sight of those he loves but removed from the touch of those who love him. For the first and only time, the perfect communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit breaks under the weight of the burden of sin-bearing. Perfect at-one-ment is broken by the cost of atonement. Here and now, for us to be at one with God, God is not at one with and in himself. To break the power of our wrong-doing, Jesus bears the weight of our sin. Here and now, an overpowering spiritual darkness cuts Jesus off from the very light he embodies.



'I'm thirsty.' John 19 v38

Hardly surprising given how Jesus has been abused since his arrest. Probably no one thought to give him anything to eat or drink while he's been in their custody and in the heat and exhaustion, his mouth must be dry, parched like the desert itself.

How ironic that Jesus, the source of living water, is dehydrated. How ironic, given his promise that we should never thirst again if we drink from him, that he should now be thirsty on our account.



'It's all done' John 19 v30

His cry tells us that the end is at hand. Jesus is done for and his work is done, complete, perfectly finished. He knows that he is dying, close to death. He knows that he has fulfilled God's will for him, perfectly enacted God's plan for Man. He knows that his mission is drawing to its painful conclusion. Exhausted, at the end of what he can do, he knows that in dying, in losing, that he has ultimately won.

The pain and agony of death are also the pangs of new birth.



“Here’s my spirit, father! You can take care of it now!” Luke 23 v46

Jesus’ last words echo the evening prayer a good Jew would say before going to sleep for the night. He may sleep secure and confident in the knowledge that God stands guard over him and will keep him safe through the hours of darkness and will be there for him when he wakes with the dawning of a new day.

Jesus has done what he has set out to do – to fulfil God’s will – and now, letting go of life, he hands himself over to God’s keeping. The night that faces Jesus is the darkness of death. The light of dawn will be the sunrise of the resurrection.

Jesus is the Light of the World. ‘The darkness did not overcome it.’



Are words sufficient to reflect such things, in such circumstances?

Let the Roman centurion in charge of the soldiers have the last word here: ‘This fellow really was God’s son.’



20 Mary of Magdala

'Very early, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark.' John 20 v1

On the first day of the week, we discovered that Jesus' tomb was empty. The rock had been rolled away. The only sign Jesus had been laid to rest in that place were his grave-clothes, outlining the shape of his body left lying there, and the neatly folded cloth that had covered his face.

Some of our women had gone early that morning to his tomb to anoint his body. Whether there were one, two or three depends on who you read who they were. The one who is common to all four gospels is Mary Magdalene, The Magdalen, Mary of Magdala.



Like many of us, Mary was from Galilee. She was one of our women followers who supported Jesus' ministry with money, food and shelter. Before she joined us, Mary was demon-possessed. Now some are possessed by one spirit; others by many. The epileptic boy had one; the Gerasene demoniac a whole host of them. Mary had seven.

Jesus healed Mary, exorcised her demons and restored her to wholeness. In gratitude, she followed us and she was useful to us.

It was Mary who was one of the women who stood at the foot of the cross, holding Jesus in prayer as he suffered hanging there, being with him in his last hours so that he should not die bereft of those who loved and cherished him.

Now Mary comes to the tomb to pay her last respects to the man we loved.



Moving through the streets of the darkened city, Mary reaches the garden tomb as the first light of dawn is breaking. What she sees turns her grief to panic. The stone has been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb.

She turns and rushes back to tell the disciples. The first people she meets are Peter and John. To them she blurts out what she fears she's seen: 'They've taken the master out of the tomb! We don't know where they've put him!' The three of them set off at a run to verify the truth. Peter is soon outdistanced by the fitter, younger man but out of fear or diffidence, John does not go into the tomb but waits for Peter to take the lead. Mary, exhausted, comes a poor third. The two of them go in and confirm what Mary told them. The shroud, in which his body had been laid to rest, lay there, the folds of linen shaping his body as if he'd simply slipped away. What could it mean? Jesus had talked to them of rising from the dead on the third day. Could this be a sign of the truth of his resurrection?

The two men go back, leaving Mary alone, desolate, distressed, crying for the man she loves who is dead and now his body has been stolen. Even this last, fading, physical link with him has been snatched from her.

Mary is drawn back to the tomb where she finds two radiant, young men in white, sitting at the head and the foot of where Jesus had been laid to rest. In her confusion, she does not ask them who they are or what they're doing. Instead, they speak to her to ask, 'Why are you crying?'

'They've taken my master away and I don't know where they put him!' Turning round, she is aware of another man standing there. Whether her eyes are filled with tears; or whether it's the difference between the light in the tomb and the light outside; or whether it's simply modesty that makes her lower her eyes – fact is Mary does not see this man is Jesus.

She fails to recognise him either when he too asks, 'Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?'

Guessing him to be the gardener, she asks, 'Sir, if you've carried him off somewhere, tell me where you've put him and I will take him away.'

Jesus replies with just one word, her name, 'Mary!' Hearing Jesus' voice shape her name in just the way she's heard him say a thousand times before, she knows exactly who's standing here before her.

She, too, manages one word, 'Teacher!' as she flings her arms around him, hugging him to her, feeling the warmth, the familiar smell, of the living body of the man she thought was dead and gone from her forever.

Gently, firmly, Jesus untangles her enfolding arms, saying, ‘Don’t cling to me. I haven’t yet gone up to the father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I’m going up to my father and your father – to my God and your God.”’

Reluctantly, Mary lets Jesus go and joyfully goes off to tell the disciples the good news – ‘I’ve seen the master’. Then she tells them all she knows.



In a garden, long ago, a woman had disobeyed God by choosing to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil forbidden to her. In a garden, here and now, a woman had obeyed the Son of God by choosing to do as she was told and to go and to be a witness to him.

Mary of Magdala, the first but not the last to be a witness of and to our risen Lord.



21 That Sunday night

'Jesus came and stood in the middle of them.' John 20 v19

Fear and excitement gripped us.

Fear. We were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Jesus had been arrested in the middle of the night and killed in the middle of the day. We were afraid of what might happen next. No wonder the doors to the house where we were were securely fastened.

Fear. We knew what Jesus had taught us about his death and resurrection. We knew that Peter and John had found the tomb empty. We knew what Mary Magdalene had said she'd seen. But we were afraid it might not be true and frightened that it might. If untrue, then all we had believed these past three years was little more than wishful-thinking, a story for children. If true, then Jesus was without doubt the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, which was, more or less, what we had thought just four days ago. And if he were, what would he think of us and do to us who had run away from him into the dark when most he had need of us?

Excitement. That our teacher and our friend, our master, who loved us and whom we loved, was not in fact dead and taken from us but mysteriously had been restored to life.

Excitement. That we too, like Mary, would meet him in the flesh and that all would be well again.

Excitement. That there was a future for us after all and that we, his disciples, still had our part to play in God's plan of salvation for all.

The evening of the day that the tomb was found to be empty, we met together in the Upper Room.



There are only ten of us. Judas has left us never to return. Thomas has somewhere else to be, something else to do, someone else to be with. Ten Jewish men in a room, talking, praying, till Jesus appears, standing in the middle of us.

Jesus is the first to speak: 'Peace be with you,' – an appropriate greeting given the shock of him coming in without warning. How did he manage to enter a secure room without knocking?

Then he shows us his hands and his side, the marks of the nails and the gash from the spear. Not a pretty sight but signs of what he'd suffered. Perhaps, on reflection, we should be upset at this evidence of his pain but we aren't. The opposite in fact: we're overjoyed at seeing him in the flesh again even though that flesh is wounded. To us, the marks of the cross are evidence that this is the Jesus we know and we love. He is alive and standing at the centre of our lives again.

Again, he says, 'Peace be with you.' He commissions us and breathes his spirit on us. We have work to do and the power to do it. One gift more: the power to forgive sins.



Later, when we tell Thomas, he doesn't believe us. Why am I being reminded of me? My reaction when Philip first told me he'd met Jesus! And here is Thomas saying he won't believe us till he's seen Jesus for himself. And his test – that he can put his finger into the nail marks and his hand into Jesus' side.

So we have a re-run a week later. Now Thomas is with us when Jesus appears and he has the chance to do what he asked to do. He touches Jesus and in doing so is reconnected with the faith that informs us all. And falling to his knees at Jesus' feet, Thomas says to him, 'My Lord and my God!'



There are other times when Jesus appears which I do not mention here. But each time people encounter the risen Lord Jesus, they cannot fail but be moved by his presence with them, by his words to them. Their hearts seem on fire from such close encounters with him.



22 Suicide

'I've got his blood on my hands!' Matthew 27 v4

One man whose heart is on fire – but for a very different reason – is Judas Iscariot.

Judas was one of us but, in the end, not at one with us. Like me, he was one of the Twelve, men Jesus chose to be his disciples. But though he was my companion, he wasn't my friend. I'm sure I never really liked him and I'm not sure he ever really liked me. 'Why?' you might ask – and I'd be hard pressed to give you a logical answer except that, with the benefit of hindsight, we now know that Judas betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities for thirty pieces of silver. And that's not kind nor the act of a friend.

My dislike of him was intuitive, beyond reason. To be honest, I think our mutual dislike was rooted in the simple fact we were two very different character types. By nature, I'm cheerful, an optimist with a ready smile and a quick wit. Judas was dour, a pessimist, calculating, serious-minded. My family background, education, our connections, didn't go down well with a Jewish nationalist, keen to advance the cause of an independent Israel.

So there we have it: Judas Iscariot and Simon the Zealot were both passionate partisans who wanted nothing less than independence from Rome. On Jesus, they were pinning their hopes for such freedom. Like Matthew, Judas was good with money. Jesus trusted him to manage the common purse. It was his responsibility to use the money we were given wisely. I guess he did. There were no complaints.

Judas was clearly one of us. Nor was there any reason why he shouldn't be still, till the night Mary used expensive perfume to anoint Jesus. And there we have it – to him, money was more important than Jesus. Love of money was key to the door which let the evil in.

In retrospect, earlier still, when Jesus told us what really lay ahead for him, it wasn't only Peter who was upset. The idea that the Messiah would be the suffering servant, envisaged by the prophet Isaiah, didn't match how Judas saw his Messiah. Peter was told off for contradicting Jesus. Judas kept his mouth shut and his thoughts to himself. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, in Judas's eyes, it was not a suitable mount for his Messiah. A horse would have been more in keeping with his image of him. Disappointed hope was the door through which the evil passed into him.



With Judas disillusioned, we come to his betrayal. What I write is what we later heard.

The High Priest was looking for a way to get to Jesus, to arrest him in private, away from the crowds. They could have arrested him when he was in the Temple, teaching, but they were afraid of the people. They couldn't be sure how the people would react to Jesus' arrest. He was, as we know, popular. So they needed a man on the inside to tell them where and when he could be taken on the quiet, without any fuss. Judas was their man. For 30 silver coins, he was

prepared to do the job – a man’s life for a month’s salary. I wonder if Judas felt he’d struck a good bargain.

You know what happens next – Judas leads them to the Garden of Gethsemane where he gives his friend away with a kiss!

But conscience is a terrible thing. No sooner done than Judas regrets what he has done. He tries to undo the harm he’s done. But the priests are not interested in the man they’d hired; they’re only interested in what he could do for them. They are not prepared to listen to his qualms or his moral reservations. They have no duty of care for him. They tell Judas to go away and sort himself out himself.

And he does; he goes away and hangs himself from a convenient tree. End of story – for him at least.



Now suicide is wrong. The sixth commandment forbids the unlawful taking of a life. Suicide rejects the principles that underpin the whole of the Law – love of God, love of neighbour, love of self. Our love of God reflects our respect for the gift of life. Our love of our neighbour is informed by our love of ourselves – both respect the value of life. Suicide flies in the face of this trinity of love.

Suicide can be viewed as an act of aggression or transferred guilt. What happened to Judas would be nothing to the priests. To us, he got what he deserved. But perhaps Jesus was Judas’s target – for failing to be the man of his dreams.

I can't believe that I'm writing this but I want to admit I do feel sorry for Judas as a man, a man who finds his life no longer worth living; a man who's messed up big time; no going back; no going on; no way of staying still; only one way out to take – his own life. Poor, troubled soul.

By turning Jesus over to the authorities was Judas trying to force Jesus' hand, to make him reveal his true identity and his real authority as God's Messiah? By betraying him, was Judas trying to make him the warrior Messiah he thought him – a legion of angels called down to snatch Jesus from the jaws of death and to restore the Kingdom to Israel? Poor, deluded soul.



As such, can God ever forgive him?

Throwing the money back at the High Priest and throwing away his life, suggest Judas was really sorry for what he'd done.

But it's not for me to say. As followers of Jesus, however, we do believe in the possibility of forgiveness and of universal redemption.

But I guess the real question is not whether God can forgive Judas but can Judas ever forgive himself for what he did?



23 Peter forgiven

'Do you love me?' John 21 v16

Peter had unfinished business. In spite of swearing he'd never leave him, the night they arrested Jesus, three times he said he didn't know him.

We had unfinished business. We were going to shift the centre of our work from Galilee to Jerusalem, the City of David, where Jesus, the Son of David, had been crucified and where, on the third day, he had risen from the dead. We were going back to pick up what we thought we'd left behind.

So it was we found ourselves on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where the memory of fishing, an urge to go fishing, was so strong that Peter suggested we spend the night on a borrowed boat. Seven of us went with him: his brother Andrew, James and John, me and Philip, and Thomas the twin.

It's odd how much I enjoyed the trip. My love of water, as you know, dates from the time I first met Philip. And that night on a boat again with him, with friends, brought memories of a less troubled, less complicated time, flooding back. Okay, so we didn't catch anything. The satisfaction came from doing and being more than from the number of fish that we caught - naught to be precise!



It's dawn on a balmy morning when a stranger on the shore shouts across to us, asking if we'd caught anything. When we reply we haven't, he tells us to cast our

net to starboard and we will. We do – and we do. The net is so heavy with fish we can't land it on the boat.

It's John who first twigs who's standing on the shore. So he tells Peter who'd stripped for work, 'It's the Master!' So without waiting for us to pull to shore, he grabs his clothes, jumps straight in and swims to shore like a joyful dog who's just spotted his lost master.

There is Jesus by a charcoal fire. He tells us to bring some of the fish we've just caught and he cooks us one of the best breakfasts I've ever tasted: fresh fish, freshly cooked in the open-air by a friend, eaten with fresh bread in the company of your friends – my idea of heaven!

Then Jesus speaks to Peter:

'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?'

'Yes Master. You know I'm your friend.'

'Well then, feed my lambs.'

'Simon, son of John, do you love me?'

'Yes Master. You know I'm your friend.'

'Well then, look after my sheep.'

'Simon, son of John, are you my friend?'

Upset, perplexed, being asked three times what he felt for him, Simon Peter says,

'Master you know everything! You know I'm your friend!'

'Well then, feed my sheep.'



What is going on? What's going on only makes sense if you remember what has already gone on. Three times, in the night, in the cold unfriendliness outside the High Priest's house, Peter denied he knows Christ. Three times, in the morning, in the warmth of having eaten together by the Sea of Galilee, Peter confirms how much he loves Christ. He is his friend. And here and now Christ is showing Peter that he is forgiven. Without pronouncing words of absolution, he has absolved Peter from his guilt. Jesus knows that Peter's heart is in the right place. By what he has just done, he is showing Peter the truth of what he knows. By what Jesus has just done, he is, in another sense of the word, 're-mem-bering' Peter.

And one detail, in case you missed it – the charcoal fire. Its smell is quite unmistakable – a distinctive smell of wood-smoke. On the shore, early one morning, Jesus had just cooked the fish over a charcoal fire. In a courtyard, late one Thursday night, Peter had once warmed himself near such a fire.

Don't you think that distinctive smell might have reminded Peter of a night he'd rather forget?



And, in case you're wondering, what is the difference between Judas and Peter?

Judas betrayed Jesus for profit because he no longer believed in him. Peter betrayed Jesus because he was scared of what they might do to him.

Judas despaired and took his own life. Peter regretted what he did and gave his life afresh to Jesus. Jesus promises Peter a life of service and a martyr's death.

It was a vocation I was to share with him.



24 Ascension

'He was lifted up . . . and a cloud took him out of their sight.' Acts 1 v9

How do you say good-bye a second time to someone you love and respect?

Actually, the first time was worse: then, Jesus was taken, snatched from us in the middle of the night and executed the very next day in a public and shameful and painful way. We were numb with the speed and the shock of it all.

The second time we knew and accepted that he was going. We were ready for it and though his departure was, to say the least, dramatic, at least we'd had the chance to get used to the idea and to say good-bye properly. We knew that he had completed what he'd set out to do; that he was going to be with our Father in heaven; that now it was down to us, up to us, to do the work he'd set in motion. Were we bereft? Not really because of his promise to us to be with us 'every single day, to the very end of the age.' And so with a light heart, praising God, we returned to Jerusalem.



Forty days earlier, with his tomb having been found empty, Jesus subsequently appeared in different places at different times to different people. Outside his tomb, to Mary Magdalene; on the road to Emmaus, to Clopas and his companion; on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, to eight of us; in the Upper Room, to all of us.

He was clearly embodied, substantial, very much in the flesh. He was able to hold bread in his hands and to break it; to put fish in his mouth and to eat it. He could touch us and we could touch him. Once more with us, he was a warm, solid, living, breathing individual. I know: I saw him; I touched him; I was touched by him too.

But he was also able to appear and to disappear at will, to enter a secure room without having to pass through its door or to disappear from a room where he'd just been sitting at table, blessing and breaking bread in full view of two people.

The day of his ascension into heaven, Jesus seemed to defy the law of gravity, being lifted up into the air by an unseen power and hidden from our sight by a cloud, the Shekinah, a sign of the very presence of God with us.

Paradox and mystery are sure signs of deity.



So we were with him when he left us in the flesh.

What we wanted to know was when the kingdom would be restored to Israel. But he wouldn't tell us. He said he couldn't tell us: that only God the Father knew the time such things would be. But he said we should concern ourselves with the present not the future. For us, he had this command: 'You must go and make all the nations into disciples. Baptize them in the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit. Teach them to observe everything I have commanded you.'

So there we had it. We were to be his witnesses to the truth that he taught, 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth.' But first, we needed to return to Jerusalem and wait to be 'clothed with power from on high.' Whatever that might mean!

So he ascended into heaven and while we were looking up, two men in white appeared and said, 'Galileans, why are you standing here staring into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you saw him go into heaven.' Confirmation of what we knew already.

We did as we were bid and returned to the city with a light heart and the promise of more to come.



25 Pentecost

'I will pour out my spirit on all people.' Acts 2 v17

It was Shavuot, Pentecost, 50 days on from Passover, when the promise that Jesus had made to us before ascending into heaven was fulfilled in a most dramatic and most memorable way.

We were twelve again. Judas had been replaced by Matthias who had been chosen by prayer and the casting of lots. Matthias was one of two who had been on the fringe of our group from start to finish. Now he was one of the Twelve, disciples, apostles, one each for the twelve tribes of Israel.

We had met together for prayer in the Upper Room. As was our custom, we were joined by some of the women who followed Jesus, among them Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was now living with John as mother and son.

It was early in the morning while we were still praying that the events that marked the birth of the Church began.



Sitting there, lost-in-prayer, I hear a strange sound. It sounds to me like a strong wind, blowing, growing in volume as it draws near. Not that unusual a sound were we out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, fishing, but we're inside, praying. I open my eyes. To my amazement, I see what seems like tongues of fire

approaching which separate to alight on each of our heads. The power flows down through my head to fill my whole body with a glow of love and joy and peace. I feel full of energy. I feel so alive, so good to be alive, as if I'm connected with everyone, with everything around me. It was like the time I first met Philip; it was like the time I first met Jesus; it was like the time I first preached the good news and healed a boy who was sick. And I think, 'Yes ! This is it !'

And the others think so, too. Filled with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, we rush enthusiastically out into the street, already thronging with people, where we meet foreign Jews from all over, here in Jerusalem for one of our pilgrim festivals. And believe it or not, our desire to share the good news with them is so great that when we Galileans, native Aramaic-speakers, open our mouths, by a miracle we seem to be speaking the mother tongue of those who hear us. And the proof? They understood what we are saying, recognising that our words are the words they use every day where they come from. But to others, what we are saying is just gobbledegook – they think we must be drunk on new wine!

We were – but not on the sort of new wine they were thinking of!



Peter motions the crowd to be silent and he starts preaching the first evangelistic sermon of the new Church. First, he catches their attention by starting off where they are now – with a joke! We're not drunk as some of them suggest. How could we be? It's only 9 o'clock in the morning!

Then he grabs their attention big-time by citing scripture – the prophet Joel. What they are witnessing is the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy:

‘In the last days, declares God, I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy; your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams; yes, even on slaves, men and women alike will I pour out my spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy.’

Then he goes on to explain about Jesus the Messiah, whom they’ve heard about surely. He explains that instead of welcoming him as their king, the Jewish authorities handed him over to the Romans to be executed.

He explains the relationship between David and Jesus and then, coming to a climax, sets the cat among the pigeons with this challenging and provocative statement: “So the whole house of Israel must know this for a fact: God has made him Lord and Messiah – this Jesus, the one you crucified.”

The crowd is cut to the heart. People ask Peter what they must do. His reply is simple, “Turn back! Be baptized – every single one of you – in the name of Jesus the Messiah, so that your sins can be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the holy spirit.”

Strong words – effective words. That day some 3,000 were added to our number.



It was a special day and in my mind, there is no doubt that we received the gift of the Holy Spirit in a most dramatic way and the consequences were dramatic too.

But, on reflection, it seems to me the Holy Spirit has always been present with me, even from an early age. In synagogue, hearing the Law read. In synagogue, learning to read and to understand the Hebrew words myself. In the river Jordan, being baptised by John. Under the fig tree, where Philip found me to tell me about Jesus. Meeting Jesus for the first time, when I was inspired to recognise him as the Son of God. When I preached to people and healed them. When Jesus breathed on us that night in the upper room when he had just risen from the dead. The Holy Spirit is always with us. Our problem is recognising the fact that he is and feeling and discerning his presence with us and us listening to him.



Now, with the Church born, we are ready to grow and to spread just as Jesus intends us to do.



26 Mary of Nazareth

'The virgin was called Mary.' Luke 1 v27

Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus. Virgin, blessed among women, wife of Joseph the carpenter. Mary, Theotokos – the God-bearer.

My mother was called Alma, the Hebrew word Isaiah uses for virgin in his prophecy: 'Look: the virgin is pregnant and will have a son and they shall give him the name Emmanuel' – which means, in translation, 'God with us.'

I wish Jesus had chosen me, not John, to look after Mary, to take her home and for her to cherish me like a mother does her son. If he had, then things may have been different in the end. But my end is what he intends and I, like Mary, am a servant of his will, whatever that will may be for me, for us.



Mary knew that she had been chosen to bear God's son, to be the mother of the Son of God, Theotokos, the God-bearer. The angel Gabriel, one of the four archangels, had appeared to her to tell her that she had found favour with God. That she would conceive and bear a son, God's son. Now Mary was innocent but not unaware of the facts of life. She knew she had never known a man so she could not become pregnant till she did. But Gabriel explained that she would be overshadowed by the power of the Most High and she would. Her boy would be the Son of God. In all humility, she accepted God's will for her. Mary simply said yes to God.

Her knowledge that her baby was going to be special was confirmed by different, independent sources. Cousin Elizabeth said as much when Mary came to stay with her. On hearing Mary's voice, Elizabeth's unborn son stirred in her womb. Joseph had a vision of an angel in a dream, confirming who was responsible for Mary's pregnancy. Shepherds, alerted by the appearance of an angel, came to the stable of an inn in Bethlehem on the night of his birth. Wise men, alerted by the appearance of a star, came from the east to present him with gold, frankincense and myrrh. Simeon, alerted by the Holy Spirit, came to the Temple at the same time as Mary and Joseph, held the child in his arms and prophesied. Anna, daughter of Phanuel, a prophetess of great age, who spent all her time in devotion in the Temple, echoed his words.

Mary found the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and questioning and demonstrating an astonishing understanding of the Law. At thirty, in her presence, Jesus performed his first miracle at a family wedding in Cana of Galilee. Throughout his three-year-ministry, she heard of his work as a teacher and healer.

Mary was hurt by his rejection by her own neighbours in their synagogue in Nazareth. She was hurt by his rejection by the Pharisees and the Sadducees. She was hurt by his arrest, trial and condemnation. She was hurt as she stood there and watched him painfully breathe out his last hours, naked, in public, on a cross.

Mary cradled him lifeless in her arms when his corpse was taken down from the cross. She witnessed the fact of his resurrection. She saw him ascend into heaven. She was present in the Upper Room at the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Mary knew who Jesus was and she loved her son, not only because he was the Son of God but because he was also her son, the first-fruit of her womb.



Whether Mary was sinless, born without sin, and dying, went straight to heaven is not for me to say. We can speculate about the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption but can we truly know? Perhaps not in this life on earth.

But this I know: the Virgin Mary was a woman in whose womb the zygote, the embryo and the foetus, which was to emerge as the baby Jesus, grew and developed. The Virgin was closer to the Word made Flesh, God made Man, than anyone else can possibly experience. I know we Jews are obsessed with purity, and one expression of it, virginity. But, of late, this revolutionary thought exercises my mind: that it is not our impurity that can taint or alienate us from God but that His purity can cleanse and restore us to Him. Such contact with the Most High would render Mary pure in a way that is inconceivable to a mere man.

Mary deserves our respect because she is the chosen instrument for the Incarnation and the fact that she agreed. In the birth of Jesus, God is embodied, self-evident to our eyes. Mary's virtue, therefore, lies not in herself but in the fact

that in her God took on our human form. Mary, then, is uniquely special on account of her most intimate relationship with Jesus, that of a mother to her son.



When John moved to Ephesus, Mary moved with him. There she lived and there she died. But no tomb of hers has there been found.



The Bartholomew Gospel

27 Persecution

'They seized them and put them under guard.' Acts 4 v3

Persecution, when it came, was no surprise.

Jesus had predicted what they would do to him. We witnessed the growing opposition to him and the ultimate consequence of that hostility to what he said and what he did.

Jesus had predicted what they would do to us: 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too.' 'They will lay hands on you . . . They will hand you over to the synagogues and prisons. They will drag you before kings and governors because of my name.' We experienced their hatred of the gospel we proclaimed through what they did to us.

There are too many examples of our ill-treatment to retell here. Let me share just three.



The first is the first time Peter and John were arrested for spreading the good news.

It starts well. One afternoon, Peter and John are going into the Temple to pray when a lame beggar asks for money. Peter tells him he has neither silver nor gold

but what he has, he will give him – and he promptly heals him in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

The man is overjoyed, for the first time in his life, skipping and dancing. In fact, his reaction is so over-the-top that a crowd gathers, wanting to know what's up.

Cue for a sermon which Peter promptly gives them off the cuff. Rooted in our shared Jewish beliefs, he tells them about Jesus' trial, crucifixion and resurrection. He identifies Jesus as the Messiah through whom God will restore all things. Then, Peter calls them to repent of their past wrong-doing and to believe in Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

Cue for the arrival of some priests and Temple guards who, annoyed at what they're up to, promptly arrest Peter and John and throw them into prison overnight.

Next day, in front of the Sanhedrin, Peter with unexpected confidence tells them that the miracle occurred in 'the name of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. He is the stone which you builders rejected but which has become the head cornerstone.'

Surprised at the eloquence of untutored men, at a loss to know what to do with them, given what they are and what they've done, the Sanhedrin resolve to try to silence Peter and John with threats. So they do, then let them go.

But, of course, things didn't stop there. They were only just beginning.



The second is Stephen, protomartyr, the first person to be put to death for his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ.

Stephen has been appointed a deacon, with special responsibilities to make sure the poor are properly cared for. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he speaks eloquently about his faith in Jesus Christ. This is not well received by some foreign Jews, members of the 'Freemen's Synagogue', who argue with Stephen without success.

Frustrated, they haul Stephen up before the Sanhedrin where they accuse him of blasphemy. Radiant, 'his face like the face of an angel', Stephen presents a faith history of Judaism from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, through slavery in Egypt, to Moses and the Exodus. It is Moses the people reject by asking Aaron to make them a golden calf. It is Moses who predicted that "God will raise up a prophet like me from among your brothers." Then Stephen traces the centre of worship from the tent of meeting in the wilderness to the Temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem. Not, of course, that God dwells in any man-made construction. Coming to the point, Stephen accuses the members of the Sanhedrin of being 'stiff-necked' with 'hearts and ears uncircumcised', guilty of persecuting and killing the prophets, guilty of receiving the Law but failing to observe the Law.

Unsurprisingly, what Stephen said enrages his hearers, not least when he claims to see 'heaven opened and the son of man standing at God's right hand.' Unsurprisingly, they have him seized, dragged out of the city and stoned to death.

Two more things. One, in dying, Stephen says, ‘Lord don’t let this sin stand against them’ which mirrors Christ’s concern for wrong-doers when he prayed for the Roman soldiers at his crucifixion. The other, that those who did the stoning ‘laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man called Saul.’



The third is of that same young man, Saul, now Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles. As Saul, he had persecuted the followers of the Way. As Paul, he pointed people to that Way, having met Christ himself on his way to Damascus. But on his Second Missionary Journey, in Philippi, Paul, with his companion Silas, is publically beaten and imprisoned.

A demon-possessed slave, with a knack for fortune-telling, identifies Paul as a servant of God Most High. Day-in, day-out, the girl shouts after Paul till, wearying of her unwanted attention, he exorcises her demon and with it her clairvoyance. Angry at this unwelcome loss of income, her owners drag Paul off to the magistrates where they, together with an anti-Semitic crowd, bang on about the pernicious influence of foreigners in their city on their good Greek values. The magistrates have Paul and Silas stripped and birched in public then thrown in jail and shackled overnight.

That night around midnight, an earthquake breaks open the doors of their prison and loosens the prisoners’ chains. In despair at the imagined loss of his prisoners, ashamed, the jailer is about to commit suicide when Paul shouts out to him that no one has escaped. Grateful, the jailer takes Paul and Silas into his

home, tends to their wounds and is converted to Christianity. In the morning, the magistrates order their release but Paul stands on his dignity as a Roman citizen who has been punished without due trial. The magistrates, to save further potential embarrassment, come to the prison in person to ask Paul to leave the city. He does taking the gospel on to Thessalonica.

Paul will ultimately die a martyr's death in Rome but before he does, by fulfilling his vocation, he will have met persecution in many places in many forms.



In this way, our folk were scattered abroad and by so doing, the faith was spread. If oil in a pan is on fire, it's not a bright idea to try to extinguish the flames with water.



28 Disciples of all nations

'So off they went, sent out by the holy spirit.' Acts 13 v4

It was time to go.

We had stayed in Jerusalem. At the time, it seemed right that we, the Twelve, should be there at the heart of the growing Church. Even when followers of the Way started to leave the city to seek safety elsewhere, we remained.

Stephen, one of seven deacons, was, as you know, the first to be martyred. James, the brother of John, was the first apostle to be martyred. He was put to the sword on the orders of Herod Agrippa. Herod had imprisoned Peter, intending the same for him after Passover, had not an angel of the Lord spirited him away out of prison.

It was time for us to go.

Christ had commanded us to bring the gospel to all nations. In Jerusalem, we had, but essentially to Jews from all nations. But the world itself was opening up to our witness. From Antioch in the north, Paul and Barnabas had taken the good news first to Crete then on into Asia Minor. In Antioch, we had been given a new name – Christians – followers of Christ. We were now New Jews, Jews by another name. But not just Jews but Jews and Gentiles together, the circumcised and uncircumcised alike, all Children of God, all brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so we were going to follow Christ by leaving Jerusalem and bringing the faith to all people wherever we could find willing-ears to receive the message. We would witness to the truth wherever the Holy Spirit was to lead us. To all nations.



Philip and I decided to travel north together. We stopped in Cana overnight for me to lay two stones, brought from the Jordan, on my parents' grave. Late the following afternoon at Bethsaida, Philip did the same. We were leaving our old life behind.

It's hard to accept the will of God when it's not what we would will ourselves. Easy to go with the flow if we don't mind where we're taken but to Philip and me, it seemed as if we were being taken from each other. To Philip, it seemed as if he were being drawn westwards: to Scythia, to Phrygia, to Ephesus and Hierapolis – where ultimately he would be martyred. To me, it seemed as if I were being drawn eastwards, to Armenia, to Albanopolis, to the shores of the Caspian Sea – where ultimately I, too, would suffer the same fate.

It was hard to say good-bye, to let go and go on. I didn't want to let go of someone who had meant so much to me for so long and go on alone. I owed Philip so much, not least the fact that he had come to me that day that Jesus called him to follow him. He did and so did I. The friendship of youth had matured into the friendship of men who long had shared a common way of life with common values. We longed to stay together but that was not what we were now being called to do.

One last time we embraced. With a heavy heart and reluctant feet, I went east and Philip west. I was never to see him again in the flesh.



I was alone but not alone – I carried my memories of him with me. I was alone but not alone – the Holy Spirit was with me, guiding me on to where I was meant go. I was alone but not alone – there were so many people ready to hear the good news, to respond with joy, to become Christians. These I baptised in the faith.

Happily for them, for me, it was no longer considered necessary to be a Christian by first becoming a Jew. This was the decision of the Council at Jerusalem in response to Peter's experience at the house of Cornelius the centurion when the Holy Spirit had filled the Gentiles before they had been circumcised. Adult circumcision is not an easy demand to make of someone, of anyone – especially not of Greeks. To the Greek mind, circumcision is an abuse of the body. To my mind, it is hard to overlook what is so deeply rooted in our culture and our covenant. But ours was the old covenant and here was I preaching the new covenant: the love of God embodied in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to bring salvation to all through his death on the Cross, his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven. He died that we might live. In our shared communion meals, in broken bread and wine outpoured, we were remembering what Jesus, the Lamb of God, had sacrificed for us – his body and his blood.

Let me share with you just one incident among the many I encountered whilst earning the name 'Apostle to the Armenians'. There was a temple in which an

idol of Astaruth was worshipped. Apparently, Astaruth had the power to heal. In fact, the idol was simply a form to front the demon, Becher, who, unknown to the worshippers at the temple, first made them ill then subsequently earned their gratitude by curing them of the same! I entered the temple and prayed. I prayed the demon might be bound, rendered powerless, and indeed he was. No more 'miracles of healing' here.

None that is till Polymius, king of the land, heard what I had done. He had a daughter who was insane. She had to be restrained. If not, she harmed herself or those who came near to touch her. Polymius sought my help and I was able to restore her to health. First, I ordered the servants to unbind her, to give her food, to let her rest and in the morning to bring her to me. Reluctantly, they did as they were told and sure enough, by the following morning, she was restored to her former self, sound of mind and body. In gratitude, the king offered me gold which I refused. I did not want his money but rather that he give his life to Christ. And here the demon helped me – back in the temple through the mouth of the idol, Becher was compelled to tell the king of Christ's descent into hell, his harrowing of hell, the liberation of the souls bound there by Satan. And the king believed and he and his household converted to Christianity and the idol destroyed.

Not everyone was pleased – the priests fled to Albanopolis to king Astyages, brother of Polymius, who was not amused. What happens next is easy to foresee.



29 Martyr

'Lord Jesus,' he cried out, 'receive my spirit.' Acts 7 v59

You don't have to read this chapter. What comes next is not nice, not pleasant. Just skip the next bit - I understand.



Polymius had a brother, Astyages, himself a king. When Astyages sent word that he, too, would very much like to see me, in my innocence, I thought that this would be one more excellent opportunity for evangelism. It was - but not in the way I was thinking. With a light heart, I journeyed eastward to Albanopolis and the sea.

What I did not know was that Astyages was an inveterate pagan, hostile to the new faith to which I was a witness. He was devoted to the worship of Astaruth, long-established in this land. It was to him that the priests of the Temple of Astaruth had fled when I exorcised the demon, Becher.

My welcome, then, was not what I'd expected. I was seized, bound, beaten and dragged before an angry king. The priests of Astaruth denounced me to him. The king refused me leave to speak. I was thrown into jail overnight - a stinking, dark cell with little to eat or drink. Early next morning, I was led out to be executed.

Since king and priests regarded me as a magus with a degree of power in the spirit world, they determined to deal with me in a manner that would profit them and pain me. Flayed from my body, they believed my skin in their hands would hold a certain virtue in their rituals. Take my clothes from me, you take away my identity, what makes me a man; take my skin and you take what makes me me.

To be flayed is degrading. To peel off our skins strips us of what allows us to touch and to be touched, to connect and to be connected. To be skinned alive demonstrates a careless contempt for life – that in God’s eyes we all have value. To do so sends a clear message about what those in power think about a gospel of love in which the Word became flesh.

So I was stripped and, in the full glare of the sun, fastened to a pole. By midday, the sunshine and the heat had had the desired effect of softening me up for the skinner’s knife.

Who would have thought the pain from so small a blade could be so sharp?

Spread-eagled, hands and feet fastened, head fixed, I was fit for the work in hand. The skinner was pains-taking in his effort to separate my skin in one piece from my flesh. Slowly, surely, deftly, starting with my head, he carefully removed my skin. Like someone skilfully peeling an apple, he did his job.

I bled. I screamed. I fainted. I was ignored. I had something they wanted from me and they had the power and the skill to take it from me. And they did!

In my pain, I found hope in half-remembered words from the Book of Job: 'I know that my Redeemer lives and at the last, I shall see him in the flesh though my skin be taken from me and I die.'



I moved in and out of consciousness. Conscious, the pain became unbearable. Unconscious, the pain became jagged, distorted images in my mind, the stuff of nightmare. But the body and mind can only take so much before the nerves grow numb. It was then, in this island of calm as I grew increasingly detached from my bleeding, bloody body, that I experienced the vision which Jesus had promised when first we'd met.

'You'll see heaven opened and God's angels going up and down upon the son of man.' I did and they were beautiful. Jesus as I remembered him before the crucifixion. Angels, beings of light, moving lightly, gracefully up and down what seemed to be a stairway connecting earth with heaven. Angels surrounded Jesus in light and one, seeing me, came and placed his hands on me, gently on my head. I felt a cooling, inner peace flow through my flesh on fire and my numbed mind. I felt calm, at one with him, at one with the God whom we served. I felt I'd been washed clean, renewed. Raphael had healed me.



They could take my smile from me –

And they did.

They could treat me shamefully –

And they did.

They could take my life from me –

And they did.

But I was not dismayed, ashamed:

I'd been true to the faith,

Practised what I'd preached,

A belief in Christ the Cornerstone,

The rock on whom I rest.



I don't know when I died or, finally, what did for me. I'm not sure whether it was the loss of blood having bled profusely. I'm not sure whether the pain and abuse produced a fatal heart attack. I'm not sure whether the skinner took pity on me as he worked downwards towards my waist, whether he severed a major blood vessel or pierced a vital organ. All I know was that one minute, there was pain and that the next, I was at peace – nothing.



It seems as if I'm outside my body, free, moving rapidly through the darkness toward a distant light. There, in silhouette, I can see a familiar figure, waiting for me. As we come together, my heart misses a beat – it's Philip – once more the lad I remember meeting a life-time ago on the banks of the Jordan. He takes my hands in his then hugs me strongly to him. I am whole again and he leads me home.



30 Looking back

'God works all things together for good' Romans 8 v28

So I, Nathaniel Bartholomew, I too have come to write my gospel. Written not at the time but out of time. The product of reflection: of what it meant to me then; of what it means to me now.

I know I have not covered all that might be covered. Have either of us the stamina for such a task – I to write and you to read? But what I have written is written to help you understand what we understood – a most wonderful, impossible truth.

Let me try to express our belief in the One God simply:

- ✓ that God our Father loves us enough to have created the universe and, made in his image, to have given us life;
- ✓ that God the Son loves us enough to have given his life for us and that through his Incarnation, the unknowable is making himself known to us;
- ✓ that God the Holy Spirit loves us enough to be present in our lives and therein to inform, inspire and encourage us to be and act as Christians.

A wonderful fact; a wonderful story; truly wonderful.

May you like me through him find in Jesus Christ – the Way, the Truth, the Life – new life in being who you're meant to be.



Epilogue

*'No one has a greater love than this,
to lay down your life for your friends'*

John 15 v13

I've really enjoyed writing 'The Bartholomew Gospel', enjoyed imagining the text through Nathaniel's eyes and with Bartholomew's voice. It's been good to share the draft with my friends and I'm grateful for their comments enabling me to polish what I've written. It's been a two-year labour of love.

Especially, let me thank two very different proof readers: my patient, long-suffering friend, Neo Notley, whose eagle eye again guarantees something like 'absolve from' is not supplanted by 'absolve of'; and the Revd Donald Pankhurst, a former chaplain here in Dinard, ill at ease with some more modern turns of phrase used by our apostle. Not least, let me thank Pauline Eyre, a dear friend, for her encouragement and for generously sharing the treasure of a lifetime's reflection and understanding. With the tact of a good teacher, her positive suggestions re content and form adds extra depth to the text.

Most Sundays, I speak to my brother, Les, by telephone. Having read the chapter on Bartholomew's martyrdom, he asked the perennial question, 'Why?' Why did God allow Bartholomew to be martyred in so degrading a way? Why does a loving, all-powerful God allow bad things to happen to good people?

'Why?' is a great question and there is no easy answer. The first 'why?' is specific to Bartholomew; the second 'why?' could apply to us all.

The first 'why?' invites us to reflect on the particular vocation to which Bartholomew was called – to be an apostle, someone sent to witness to the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. For Bartholomew, to be an apostle also meant that he would be a martyr. Now I don't know when Bartholomew knew that he was personally being called to die for his faith in Christ. We know he knew who Jesus was almost as soon as he met him. We know Jesus spoke of his own martyrdom; that to follow him was for each of us to take up our individual cross. We know Bartholomew would have known that some of the followers of Christ had been killed for witnessing to the truth. I guess, at some point, Bartholomew must have known and accepted the fact that he could be killed for what he represented. Martyrdom is the gift of a life to achieve a greater good. John the Baptist, Jesus the Christ, Stephen the deacon, James the brother of John, Peter and Paul, Philip and Bartholomew, all died a martyr's death, the cost of their witness to their belief in the truth of God.

The second 'why?' invites us to question the paradox at the heart of our Christian belief about the nature of the God whom we worship: that he is a loving God so he is well-disposed to us, his children; that he is an omnipotent God so he has the capacity to do all that can be done. So if God could and if God would, then why doesn't he?

There are well rehearsed arguments – theodicies – to argue God's case for him. If we can choose, if we have real free will, then God is necessarily limiting his freedom to intervene by giving us the space freely to decide, the space freely to love. That the gift of feeling means that we can feel both pleasure and pain. That

our experience of pain may teach us useful and necessary lessons. That the gift of life means that we are also gifted with death. Beginnings have ends.

Now whether any such argument convinces you will depend on how you make sense of the world in which we live. No one will convince anyone of the truth of what we believe simply by rational debate. All we can do as people of faith is to share our experience of what is authentic; share what we find to be real for us; share what we know has the ring of truth to us. That is why it is well worth every generation hearing afresh the stories of the heroes of our faith like Bartholomew and his friend, Philip.

For me, I'd like to think that our vocation as people is to serve other people. It's how we live that matters for by loving our neighbour, we are demonstrating the truth of a loving God who loves us as a father loves his son, as a mother her daughter, as a parent their child. And, as you know, love costs.

To me, the world in which we live is both dynamic and real, a place where our God is not toying with us and treating us like pets wrapped in cotton wool. Instead, he allows us to grow through experience, pleasant and harsh, and to make our own choices with sufficient space to come to him in love. And, as you know, freedom has a price.

Bartholomew, in his life and through his death, did just that – not only for himself, not only for the people of Armenia, but also for all those who have been touched by the truth of the gospel of which he is but part. His skin, therein his identity, was taken from him and with it his life. Like his life, his death is his gift to us

which mirrors his commitment to God embodied in his resolve to follow Jesus. For him, there is real pain but in the context of what Bartholomew believes to be true, that pain has meaning.

Life is worth dying for;

Love is worth the giving.

There are no easy answers but I hope 'The Bartholomew Gospel', a fifth gospel by the fifth disciple (according to John) to follow Jesus will encourage you to take another look at a familiar story and to reflect on what it might mean to you.



Almighty and everlasting God,
who gave your apostle Bartholomew grace
truly to believe and to preach your word:
grant that your Church
may love that word he believed
and may faithfully preach and receive the same
through Jesus Christ your Son our lord,
who is alive and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
one God, now and for ever.



Almighty Father,
whom truly to know is eternal life:
teach us to know your Son Jesus Christ,
as the way the truth and the life;
that we may follow the steps
of your holy apostles Philip and Bartholomew,
and walk steadfastly in the way that leads to your glory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

