

BY
SUCH
STRIPES
ARE
WE
HEALED

JACK SHAVER

Contents

Ash Wednesday	An invitation into the shadows of human sin	
Thursday	How to recognize God (1)	
Friday	How to recognize God (2)	
Saturday	Enough said?	
The First Sunday of Lent	What's God looking for?	7
Monday	Duped into preaching	
Tuesday	When things get tough	
Wednesday	When things are hopeless	
Thursday	Bearing the burden of caring	
Friday	Cheer up, your travail is coming	
Saturday	The suffering of God's chosen one	
The Second Sunday of Lent	Fancy meeting God here!	18
Monday	Don't comfort me	
Tuesday	The short trip from God to Satan	
Wednesday	Look who made it!	
Thursday	Mother hen's lament	
Friday	Where have you been, Lord?	
Saturday	The proof of sonship reversed	
The Third Sunday of Lent	God is in God-forsakenness	28
Monday	What's the father waiting for?	
Tuesday	Keeping the right company	
Wednesday	Blessed incompleteness	
Thursday	Who'd long to be at that feast?	
Friday	What one thief saw	
Saturday	Living bread	
The Fourth Sunday of Lent	Look what's called glorification	39
Monday	Saving foolishness	
Tuesday	It's God who justifies	
Wednesday	While yet sinners	
Thursday	Why trust what can't make alive?	
Friday	The zeal to be blameless is well lost	
Saturday	What can put the world right?	
The Fifth Sunday of Lent	Any old death won't do	50
Monday	Finally, someone says it	
Tuesday	It's flesh that saves us	
Wednesday	God and anger	
Thursday	God's penetrating Word	
Friday	Joy in the cross	
Saturday	Holy contamination	



©The United Church of Canada
All Rights Reserved
ISBN 0-88622-196-X
7M/12/85/APL

Contents *continued*

Palm/Passion Sunday	Once nobody, now somebody	61
Monday of Holy Week	Unfinished business	
Tuesday of Holy Week	Viewers of the promise from afar	
Wednesday of Holy Week	Treasures in clay pots	
Thursday of Holy Week	Don't pull those weeds	
Good Friday	A wonderful reason for not being saved	
Holy Saturday	What to do till Jesus comes	
Easter Day	This is the Lord's doing and wondrous in our eyes	71

About the prayers

Users of this book might notice that the prayer at the end of each day's reading falls into one of seven categories: Speak Lord, Petition, Confession, Thy Kingdom Come, Thanksgiving, Offering, or Benediction.

The decision to organize the prayers this way arises out of a concern for prayer's essential purpose: *engagement with God*. The intention is to provide a resource each day for the reader's engagement with God, rather than that the prayers should serve simply to reinforce the day's message.

On any given day, therefore, the reader may opt to use a prayer other than the one printed for that day, selecting, rather, a category more appropriate to his or her condition.

Ash Wednesday

An invitation into the shadows of human sin

Ezekiel 2: 1 — 3: 3

This is how the season of Lent is described in an early United Church service book:

During these weeks the church enters with her Lord deeper and deeper into the shadows of human sin and sorrow, that she may know the fellowship of his suffering.

In this Lenten book all the readings and reflections are intended to help us do just that.

The description is not based on the assumption that the purpose of Lent is to make us all miserable. "Forty days" of imposed deprivation are not being proposed as good for you, in line with the proposition that it's not medicine unless it tastes bad.

The invitation to get to know the fellowship of Christ's suffering is an invitation to get to know the power of God. One can find redemptive fellowship by entering the shadows of human sin and sorrow, but that is to be distinguished from doing oneself good by punishing oneself. There is a mystery here. But it is a mystery that calls for study. We are several times warned in the Bible that God's wisdom will look like foolishness. (However, everything that looks foolish is not God's wisdom!)

What this book proposes is that we reflect each day through Lent on a different passage of scripture that

deals with this theme of Christ's suffering. The first 12 readings are taken from the Hebrew scriptures. In every case the author is a person who preached and wrote during the sack of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon which followed it. The theologians of this period made a remarkable contribution to Israel's understanding of God.

It was as Israel went through its darkest night that some of its preachers received the most enlightening revelations into the nature of God.

Ezekiel is the preacher whose writings we explore first. His style makes him hard to read, but he is very worth getting to know.

Put the passage from chapter two and three alongside Psalm 137, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" By contrast, some of these songs—like Psalm 2—went on about how the Lord would never let anyone destroy Jerusalem. Now (in Psalm 137), with the holy city destroyed and the people in exile, their tormentors called for them to sing one of their songs.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon were a world-shaking, bitter blow to Israel. This is the context in which Ezekiel felt called to preach.

"Son of Man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me to this very day. The people are also very impudent and stubborn. I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.'

"But you son of man, hear what I

say to you. Open your mouth and eat what I give you....” Behold a written scroll was upheld before me...and there were written upon it words of lamentation and mourning.

And he said to me, “Eat this scroll that I give you.” Then I ate it and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

Israel *could* sing God’s song in a strange land!

It was through God’s servant Ezekiel that the people of Israel learned that their God was as real and as potent in Babylon as in Jerusalem.

Speak Lord

Your Word O God, is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit.

You are the one with whom all life has to do.

Address

our zeal and our sloth,
our rage and our compliance,
our righteousness and our bad
conscience,
our loving and our grasping,
our letting go and our indifference,
All this needs your discerning Word.
It needs sorting out.

It needs putting right.

Fit our hearts to receive your Word.
As you shake the world, grant us eyes
to see and minds to recognize what
cannot be shaken.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Thursday

How to recognize God (1)

Ezekiel 7: 23-27

Israel’s prophets are worth getting to know. The reward of a study of the biblical writers is an appreciation of the deep insights of Israel’s religious thinkers. It is one thing to be told that this nation was created by God for the purpose of blessing all nations. It is another thing to watch a nation receive its insights. As students of the Bible gain skills in identifying early and late material, they begin to see the influence of this or that written on Israel’s theology. They get a sense of meeting the very person unto whom certain revelations of God came for the first time. Before their eyes God’s own self breaks into history. They watch it happen.

Preachers had made significant contributions to Israel’s theology *before* the exile. Amos, Hosea and the first Isaiah were all giants in their time. Although each brought unique gifts, they had a basic message. God was not some kind of capricious power that could be manipulated by cultic practices. God was not interested in animal sacrifices but in societal justice. What made a nation strong and prosperous was the fairness of its social policy: Did the poor get cared for? Could fellow citizens be relied on? Were widows and orphans looked after? Was family integrity upheld? If these components were not present, no amount of religious practice, armed might, foreign alliances, wealth or fortifications could save

the nation when it came under pressure. These prophets brought a breakthrough in theology to the people of Israel. God was not just naked power, but recognizable order; not just a God of battles, but of ethics. The One with whom all life and matter has to do, has also to do with how humans organize their lives together.

The exilic prophets presented this same message with variations. They each also recorded some revelations that appear to be unique. That is why I have suggested we study them during these opening days of Lent. We consider today a unique twist Ezekiel puts on this traditional prophetic message.

In those verses of the seventh chapter he sounds like the earlier preachers. Defeat in battle, drought, and crop failure, the desolation of cities, the breakdown of the social fabric, are all seen as the consequence of social wrong. There is violence in city life. Rulers enjoy the perks of power but are not responsible. Judges do not provide justice. Social critics paint the faults in the social fabric with whitewash. Preachers say "Thus saith the Lord" when the Lord didn't say anything. Priests do not distinguish the sacred from the profane.

Ezekiel repeats a phrase again and again as he describes defeat, deprivation and desolation. All this is "so that you shall know that I am the Lord."

It is as Israel's pioneer theologians try to make sense of their history that they receive a penetrating word from God. Israel's God is met in Israel's

history. Social disaster is a time for finding out who God is.

Petition

Almighty God, Father and Mother of all, we are weary of wanting, and don't like being that way. The pain of our unfulfilled desires destroys our desiring. We catch ourselves choosing to want nothing.

God, that's no way to choose life. You put before us life and death and charged us to choose life.

Therefore let our prayers come unto you. We want life to go right. We want friends. We want to be loved. We want life to go right for our loved ones. While we want all this we know that something is required of us.

We know too that some of our life-pain is our own fault. We know that some of our most stubborn pursuits are at the expense of others.

We confess that our longing and striving need to come before you to be put right.

Therefore hear our cries, dear God; we give them full voice before you.

Give us the courage to confess our wants, and in that power to forgo them if it be your will.

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen

Friday

How to recognize God (2)

Ezekiel 20: 1-17

While the theme is constant with the prophets of Israel that national disaster is the consequence of bad religion and irresponsible social behaviour, it was proclaimed by a few of them that this was not the whole story of the relationship. In the book of Job, in the preaching of Jeremiah and Isaiah of the Exile, and in some of the Psalms, we find protests against the explanation that all suffering is the just punishment of God. Why do the wicked prosper? How is it the unrighteous get ahead? Nor are these protests quite answered by the reminder that if you wait long enough you will see justice prevail.

Today's reading is taken from the 20th chapter of Ezekiel. One gets the full force of his message by reading through to verse 44. Here again he sounds like many of Israel's writers, yet we hear something new.

Biblical writers and preachers are constantly retelling the story of Israel. In the so-called Law books the story is retold several times from several points of view. Law and story are inseparable. Theology and history are inseparable. Psalm 106 and the rubrics describing how the Passover is to be celebrated indicate that worship consists in the telling of the story of Israel.

While the God of Israel is seen as the creator and sustainer of the universe, the way the creator God *comes to be*

known is through what takes place in the history of a people. God becomes known to Israel through history.

In chapter 20 Ezekiel is writing the "Story of Israel according to God." A little patience will allow Ezekiel's repetitious style to become eloquent.

"Is it to inquire of me that you come? As I live, says the Lord God, I will not be inquired of by you...let them know the abominations of their fathers."

Then the Lord retells the story:

"I swore to the people that I would bring them out of slavery to the good land I had promised them ...and I gave them my statutes and showed them my ordinances, by whose observance man shall live ...But the House of Israel rebelled against me...Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and make a full end to them. But I acted for the sake of my name, that I should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out."

So Israel was spared.

The rhythm is repeated again and again: at the time of the escape from Egypt, at the failure of nerve when the crossing into Canaan is first considered, in the wilderness, at the conquest, in the time of the kings. "Then I thought I would pour out my wrath and make a full end to them. But I acted for the sake of my name."

Yesterday we read that the purpose of Israel's repeated desolation was that "you shall know that I am the Lord."

Today we hear (verse 44): "And you shall know that I am the Lord when I deal with you *for my name's sake, not according to your corrupt doings.*"

It was a familiar sermon that said "we get to know God when we are spared what is coming to us."

Confession

Almighty God, our hearts are open
to you
our desires known
and none of our secrets
are hidden.

It is good to know ourselves known,
to come before you stripped of all
pretence.

But God, we are not up to it!
We cannot face what we see in the
light of your countenance,

Unless you empower us we cannot
cope with your knowledge of
us.

Only by your grace can we come
truly before you,
Have mercy upon us.

We are weary of the powerless
healing of self-forgiveness,

We long for the genuine healing of
your forgiveness.

If that means we have to see ourselves
the way you see us, then open our
eyes.

Have mercy upon us,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Saturday

Enough said?

Ezekiel 33: 7-9, 34: 1-6

In the prophetic books of the Bible, most of what God has to say to Israel is critical. God is judging a wayward, stubborn people even while calling them into being. These same writings indicate that conflicting messages are being proclaimed. There is much reference to false prophets.

Imagine what it would be like to have lived then. Different preachers are telling you that God is saying different things. Years later there will come an official decision about which preaching was the true message from God. But at the time, you would have to decide for yourself which one was to be believed.

Or imagine what it would be like to have felt a call to *preach* in those days. How can you know for certain what God is calling you to say? How can you escape the agony of self-doubt? And what possible cure for your doubt is safe?

Ezekiel is most outspoken on the matter of false prophets. They come out with lying divinations. They run where they haven't been sent. They say "Thus says the Lord" when God hasn't said anything. They whitewash the faults in the nation's foundations. They cry "Peace!" when there is no peace.

It is fascinating to watch this man wrestle with what is called for in this situation. What is the appropriate ministry? What is God looking for?

When have you finally done the responsible thing? As we explore Ezekiel's writings, we discover that the answer he receives is far from simple.

In the first of our two readings for today, Ezekiel is given the role of watchman (almost the same charge appears in the third chapter). The watchman is responsible for warning the wicked. If he warns the wicked and such a one repents, both lives are spared. If the wicked do not repent, they shall surely die. But if the watchman does not warn the wicked and the wicked do not repent, the watchman's life will be required of him. "Warn the wicked and you are off the hook."

Back in chapters two and three there is a slight change in theme. Here the word of the Lord, repeated in triplicate, is: "Go to this rebellious house who won't listen to you and speak what I say, whether they listen to you or not."

This is a fuller responsibility than, "Warn the wicked and you are off the hook."

The second reading is taken from that remarkable 34th chapter. Here God's disgust is directed against Israel's shepherds, rather than at the stiff-necked people of God's rebellious house. God swears that he himself will take on the shepherding of Israel.

The first six verses reveal what is expected of a proper shepherd. And it is a lot more than, "Warn the wicked and you are off the hook."

"Ho, shepherds of Israel who have

been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ... The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with forces and harshness you have ruled them."

What is expected of the shepherd is wonderfully more extensive than what's expected of the watchman.

To be God's person is to be given a fascinating burden. It might even turn out to be good.

Thy Kingdom Come

Gracious God, so much of our conversation with you is concerned with our own affairs. Our lives are out of sorts and we wish they weren't.

But somewhere at the heart of that is a hunger and thirst after righteousness and its reign on the earth.

Deep within us you have placed a longing for your kingdom.

Quench not this smoking flax but fan it to a flame. Purify, as well as inflame, our zeal for your reign.

Open our eyes to see the hidden places where your sovereign power is at work.

Keep us watchful and expectant for the sudden flashes of your victorious love.

Make us open to receive the hastening of your kingdom for which we pray.

Give us ears to hear the groaning together of the whole creation and the whole human race for the redemption of the world.

God save the people. Amen

The First Sunday of Lent

What's God looking for?

Ezekiel 13: 4-16; 22: 23-31

These two final readings from the book of Ezekiel look like a lot of verse for one day's reflection, but they serve to frame what is perhaps Ezekiel's most striking message. You have to compare the two passages carefully before you even notice the message. The lines to be compared appear in the midst of almost similar messages. The preaching is common to all the prophets from Amos to Ezekiel. Kings, priests, prophets and people are all forsaking their responsibility under God. In the 13th chapter at verse five these words, addressed to the prophets of Israel, appear:

"You have not gone up into the breaches, or built up a wall for the house of Israel, that it might stand in battle in the day of the Lord."

A pretty high doctrine of ministry is suggested by that metaphor. The nation's foundations are faulty. Someone is needed to build up the wall and repair the faults or in a time of testing the nation will collapse. Given that this is a stubborn people, a lot is being asked of anyone speaking on behalf of God. To build up this people requires more than getting the word said, it includes getting it *heard*!

Now listen to verse 30 in chapter 22:

"And I sought for one among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none."

This is not quite the same sentence. Here, God is looking for someone who will stand in the breach before him. What is sought is someone who will bring it about that God does not have to destroy the people.

Hidden away in this little verse is a metaphor setting forth a remarkable doctrine of ministry. God is looking for one to take responsibility for the nation's sins. It is a metaphor that keeps exploding new insights. It's a living version of the story of God and the human race.

God has to do with the ordering of how we shall live on the earth. As long as humans try to put it together some *other* way, it won't work.

Disaster is the consequence of ordering human society unjustly. An unjust human situation had better be prepared for rage.

Given that state of affairs, what is God doing? Looking for someone to get between his rage and the people who have it coming. It is not enough to punish the wicked; what's called for is that they be *saved*.

This notion is not unique to Ezekiel. It appears elsewhere in the Bible. It shines forth in Job's protests. It breaks through in other exilic prophets. Moses is reported to have advocated on behalf of people whom God was about to destroy. As the first Christian believers began to find words to declare what, for them, had been the significance of Jesus Christ's ministry, they set forth variations of this theme.

The good news about embracing human sin and sorrow is that a

glimpse of the wondrous love of God may come of it. The good news about embracing human sin and sorrow is that *saving* may come of it. The good news about embracing human sin and sorrow is that God is looking for someone to do it.

Thanksgiving

Living God, it is a mystery to us why we spend so little time in a grateful state. We are in the habit of finding fault. We justify it on the basis that we have high standards, but our complaining becomes tiresome even to ourselves.

Dear God, how long since we last offered genuine praise? How long since we thoroughly enjoyed anything?

You have given us the gift of life; wouldn't it be something if we received it with delight? You have given us loved ones; what if we joyfully took them to our hearts? Heaven and earth declare your wonder, terror and glory. What if we did, too?

Almighty God, genuine praise is not in us because our living and loving is out of joint. Sin has alienated us from ourselves and others.

God, if you could just take away the sin of the world...

What have we said? O Lamb of God, have mercy upon us.

No wonder the angels are astonished by your work of salvation.

Praise be to God for ever and ever.

Amen

Monday

Duped into preaching

Jeremiah 20: 7-12

The prophet Jeremiah had a long, tempestuous career. He was a member of a priestly family officiating at the local shrine of Anathoth. He broke with his family to join King Josiah's religious reform movement which sought to centralize worship in Jerusalem. After making this painful choice he became disillusioned with the Jerusalem scene.

During the reign of subsequent kings, the situation in Jerusalem deteriorated. The power of the Babylonian empire was on the increase. The city states of the Palestinian corridor came under increasing pressure. Powerful nobility in Jerusalem sought to persuade the king to link Judah with Egypt. Jeremiah was convinced that it was God's will that Babylon prevail. His criticism of the nation's foreign policy got him into deep trouble. He was arrested and put in prison as a traitor.

Zedekiah, Judah's last king, kept releasing Jeremiah, seeking from him a word from the Lord and then heeding the contrary advice of his princes. The Babylonian emperor, tiring of Judah's swings from allegiance to rebellion, completely destroyed the city and sent all important families into exile.

This is the context of Jeremiah's ministry. His preaching, like that of the other prophets, included social and religious criticism, but was especially

specific concerning Judah's foreign policy. In chapters 27 and 28 we get a picture of what it was like to hear preachers accuse one another of false prophecy. Was it the will of God that Babylon triumph or not? Hananiah says "no"; Jeremiah says "yes." It makes it difficult for the listener when opposing preachers get so specific as they proclaim the word of God. Imagine the problem it makes for the *preacher!*

Of all the prophets, Jeremiah best reveals in his writing what it was like to be the one called to speak the word of the Lord in a time of historic turmoil.

In chapter 28 we find a rather tranquil reflection on the problem. In his conversation with Hananiah Jeremiah says:

"The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet."

That's a cool answer, but it doesn't quite deal with the anguish associated with the call to be God's spokesperson when history is in turmoil. The passage which we selected from chapter 20 for today's reading is more revealing. You will notice we move from prose to poetry at verse 7.

When I was at college we used a translation that rendered verse 7 thus:

"O Lord, you duped me and I let myself be duped."

What is it like to be God's person?

I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me.

For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!"

For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.

Yet there is no getting out of it.

If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

Speak Lord

God, we need a word from you.

We're surrounded by a confusion of voices, telling us all that we are doing wrong, enticing us to consume more than we do, pointing to a thousand things we should be doing.

You speak.

Give us your words.

A lot of zealous people are speaking for you.

They are saying different things.

You speak.

Give us your word.

We can lose everything if we trust in a word that's not reliable.

We can destroy everything if we are driven by a word that is not true.

You speak.

You love the world.

Your word will not fail us; neither will it set us in destructive ways.

Give us your word.

And give us ears to hear it.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Tuesday

When things get tough

Jeremiah 12: 1-5

When you read the prophetic books of the Bible you get a magnificent picture of the history of the relationship between God and the nation of Israel. The ups and downs of the nation's history are seen as revealing the nature and purposes of God. God chastises, punishes and restores. You get glimpses of God's righteousness and God's steadfast love in the suffering of the nation and in the fact that it continues to exist.

The book of Jeremiah does this and more. It is very revealing of the prophet himself and *his* ups and downs as he struggles with his vocation. Here we get intimate glimpses of an individual's relationship with God. In Jeremiah's book we see, not just what is going on between God and God's people, but what goes on between God and God's person. Other prophets reveal some of this but none of them as eloquently as Jeremiah does.

In verses 14-18 of chapter 20, following his complaint about the word of God burning inside him when he decided not to speak it, we find this lament:

Cursed be the day
on which I was born!
The day when my mother bore me,
let it not be blessed!
Cursed be the man
who brought the news to my
father,
"A son is born to you,"

making him very glad.
Let that man be like the cities
which the Lord overthrew
without pity;
Let him hear a cry in the morning
and an alarm at noon,
because he did not kill me in the
womb;
so my mother would have been
my grave,
and her womb for ever great.
Why did I come forth from the
womb
to see trouble and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame?

These words reveal a powerful downer for one who also wrote in verses 4 and 5 of chapter 1:

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

What has all this pain and promise, conviction and self-doubt, commitment and self-rejection, to do with being God's person?

Add to these two passages the verses from today's reading in chapter 12. They record God's most amazing response to Jeremiah's complaint, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?"

"If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you fall down, how will you do in the jungle of the Jordan?"

You think it is tough now? How will you do when it gets tougher? It seems that what is expected of God's per-

sons is that they have it tough. That's not when you are abandoned by God; that's when you are drawing near to God.

Confession

O God of steadfast love,
Again and again we need to have
you call us yours,
Hide not your face from us.
If that means we must see ourselves
as you see us, so be it.

Shine away.

Pierce the darkness of our
self-deception.
Penetrate the veneer of our piety.
Illumine our neglectfulness.
Reveal what is dissimulating about
our loving.

Dear God,

What we see here is what we are.
What we are needs to be washed
clean.
What we are needs making over.
We need to be born again, by
water and the Spirit.

Dear God,

Your words says you will not
refuse the Holy Spirit to those
who ask.

Come Holy Spirit,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Wednesday

When things are hopeless

Jeremiah 32: 6-15

During Jeremiah's lifetime the kingdom of Judah suffered many ups and downs. The imperial power of Assyria rotted away by the later years of the sixth century BC and fierce Sythian marauders devastated the outposts of empire. Although Jeremiah warned that the devastation would reach Judah because of its idolatry and corruption, Jerusalem was spared. It became easy to believe that Jerusalem was God's chosen city and that it enjoyed divine protection. By all earthly signs Jeremiah must have been made to wonder whether he was himself one of the false prophets, for he had warned of Jerusalem's destruction.

But with the rise of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and the death of King Josiah in 609 BC, things went downhill for Judah. Due to Egyptian influence, the succession was interrupted and Jehoichim was placed on the throne. From then until the destruction of the city, Judah's allegiance vacillated between Babylon and Egypt. Although he owed his position to the intervention of Egypt, Jehoichim swore allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar when Babylon defeated Egypt at Carchemish. Three years later he broke his oath. It was his son Jehoikin who reaped the reward for this behaviour. The emperor ordered his satellite kingdoms to take care of this rebellion. Thus with the siege of the city and the death of the new

king, the first exiles were deported to Babylon.

Zedekiah was placed on the throne as Nebuchadnezzar's vassal. Though he consulted Jeremiah for a word from the Lord he heeded the advice of the pro-Egyptian nobles and undertook his own revolt. This time Nebuchadnezzar gave the siege his personal attention and Jerusalem fell in 586 BC. Zedekiah's two sons were executed before his eyes and the king himself was blinded. The remaining important families were sent into exile. The city and temple on God's holy hill were destroyed.

Throughout all these years Jeremiah was in great personal danger. He did not see how centring the worship of God in Jerusalem, by itself, could reform the nation. He did not see anything sacred about the city or temple if it did not produce a people who heeded God's word. He saw the hand of God in the rising power of Nebuchadnezzar and opposed the alliances with Egypt. These were not popular positions.

Towards the end of this period the nation, as well as Jeremiah, was in great danger. Disaster followed disaster. The violence and spoil he had been so long predicting were upon the nation. In the light of all that was promised and hoped for about the people of Israel, these were disastrous times. This was the end of an age.

What do we find God's person saying in the face of cataclysm? Hear what he wrote to the first band of exiles for whom the end of the world had come:

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their pro-

duce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

Jeremiah 29: 5-7

In the verses we selected for today's reflection we have another indication of what God's person does when the end of the world threatens. In the same breath in which he warns the king of his death and the destruction of the city, he makes arrangements to purchase of piece of land!

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

Thy Kingdom Come

Almighty God, giver of life, ruler of history,

The promise of your victorious reign lightens all our way.

The light from your love of the world has shone in our hearts; and nothing completely quenches it.

Hear the prayer of all of us that you hasten your kingdom.

Break tyranny's hold.

Feed the hungry.

Liberate the captive.

Provide for the homeless.

Uplift the fallen.

Hush the clamour of war.

Wipe away all tears.

You have put a groaning in us, and in all creation, waiting for our adoption as children of God. Hear us as we join the cry of the world in travail: Hasten your kingdom!

Our hope is in your promised reign.

Amen

Thursday

Bearing the burden of caring

Jeremiah 8: 18 — 9: 11

This is our fourth and final glimpse at the writings of Jeremiah. In the first three passages, and the five passages from Ezekiel, we came upon some penetrating revelations of the relationship between God and human sin and sorrow. There is no suggestion in the Bible that Ezekiel and Jeremiah ever met each other, but it is surely clear that they were both met by the same God. They had the same trouble with false prophets which offered slight healing to the nation. While seeing national disaster as the consequence of unjust economic and social practices, they came to understand the heart of God's purpose to be the salvation of the people, not simply the matching of crimes and punishments. They both came to a high doctrine of the prophetic call. To accept such a call was to get under the burden of the nation's waywardness.

The speaker for God no longer stood aloof, simply warning the wicked of the disastrous consequences of wickedness, but bore the burden of that wickedness.

Uniquely in Jeremiah's case, we have come upon revelations of the nature of the relationship between God and the individual prophet. If so much hangs on your message-bearing, how can you be up to such a burden? If so much hangs on your message-bearing, how can you *pass up* that burden? Since the message is so open to misrepresentation, how do you cope with the agony of self-doubt? If the nation is that hard of hearing, how long can you wait for results? Throughout the book we keep coming upon eloquent testimony as to what it is like to be God's person.

I selected today's verses because I think they make the most tender witness to what happens to the human heart when it gets close to God. Read through the verses until you get a sense of the movement.

"My grief is beyond healing, my heart is sick within me." From all over the land false assurances are heard: As long as the king is safe in Jerusalem the Lord will reign in Zion. As long as the fertility rites are observed, the harvest will be plentiful. All the time falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land. A brother cannot trust his brother and a neighbour cannot trust her neighbour. The people heap oppression upon oppression and deceit upon deceit and they refuse to know God.

Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts:

"Behold, I will refine them and test them, for what else can I do, because of my people?

Their tongue is a deadly arrow;
it speaks deceitfully;
with his mouth each speaks peace-
ably to his neighbour,
but in his heart he plans an ambush
for him."

What is it like to be the bearer of those words to a rebellious house?

Do the following words sound as if they are coming from one who has come to know God?

For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me.

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?

O that my head were waters,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
that I might weep day and night
for the slain of the daughter of my people!

Petition

Father and Mother of all,

Hear our deep cries. Hear our anger.

With tears of rage we lift up before you the sick with killing diseases, for whom there appears to be no relief or cure;

the victims, whose bodies were violated so early in their formation that their wounds seem beyond the reach of healing powers;

the lives, doomed from the beginning by the hostile fate to which they were born.

Dear God, we are talking about real people we know and love.

And through them we begin to sense the countless numbers in like circumstances throughout the world.

We lift them all up before you. Hear their cries.

If we didn't bring them before you, we'd have to harden our hearts against them.

If we didn't rage on their behalf, we'd have to stop caring.

Dear God, in your mercy hear us, whether our praying is proper or not. And let not the sun go down on our wrath.

Amen

Friday

Cheer up, your travail is coming

Isaiah 54: 1-3

Almost all students of the Bible agree that the book of Isaiah contains material from a variety of periods in Israel's history. Some of it belongs to a period before and during the destruction of the northern kingdom. Some of it belongs to the time of the Babylonian exile and some fits the time of the restoration of Jerusalem. The thinking, as well as the context,

is different in the writings of each period.

At the same time, all the writings seems to reflect a common spirit. It is thought that the book is the work of a prophetic movement, made up of the disciples of the "first" Isaiah of Israel. There were different preachers down the years, but all were members of the same order.

The verses we consider today and tomorrow come from the preaching of members of this movement during the exile. The verses for consideration on Sunday come from the preaching during the restoration.

In the period around 540 BC a great change took place in the middle east. The power of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon waned as that of Cyrus of Persia grew. This brought new possibilities for Israel. For while Babylon's imperial policy had been to break the power of the small city states by redistributing their leading citizens to different locations throughout the empire, Persian policy was the opposite. Cyrus turned these communities of exiles into an underground movement by promising them all that, in his empire, they could rebuild their cities provided they swore allegiance to him.

All those familiar oracles that start with: "Comfort, comfort ye my people. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem and say to her that her warfare is ended" were spoken at this time when the promise of political restoration was on the horizon. This particular school saw Cyrus as God's chosen

one—God's right hand—in freeing captive Israel. Not many years earlier Jeremiah named Nebuchadnezzar as God's right hand in *destroying* Jerusalem. Some time through this same period Ezekiel was preaching that Israel could be God's people with or without Jerusalem.

It must not have been easy for the people in the street to know who was speaking for God.

Yet something remarkable is happening to Israel's theology through all this painful confusion. While the specific implications these exilic prophets draw may differ, what we find common is a breakthrough in understanding *the connection between God and suffering*.

The verses we consider today first moved me while I was a university chaplain during the sixties. The world we knew was losing its underpinnings. People grasped at intimate communities only to have them disintegrate. We dwelt in a desert. And here I came upon a verse where someone set out to cheer people up by saying, "All you poor people who have never been in travail, you are going to be in travail. All you poor people in the desert, now is the time to enlarge your tents!"

Now it may be that only a woman can really understand that. But I think all of us can partially understand that strange truth. Travail can be good news, when it means giving birth. The absence of travail is something to be pitied, if it means emptiness.

Offering

Almighty God

We've got a profusion of concerns and projects.

We're zealous about some and half-hearted about others.

We're driven by concerns we don't approve of and are in flight from tasks we approve of but dread.

We bring our work before you:
our pursuits,
the things we strive for,
all that we persist in.

We bring our loves before you:
our passionate desires,
our longings of the heart,
all that we adore.

We offer all this to you.

We loosen our grip on all our concerns so that you can put them right.

We take our hands off all our works so that you can make of them that which is well pleasing in your sight.

We bring you ourselves so that we can become a fit offering.

Amen

Saturday

The suffering of God's chosen one

Isaiah 52: 13 — 53: 12

This won't be the first time you have set eyes on this passage. At least it can be counted on that you have *heard* parts of it before.

Can you imagine hearing it for the first time? Especially when you are a people who have been hearing for centuries that suffering is the result of sin. If you obey God, you will prosper; if you disobey God, you will have it rough. You have been told for generations about the Holy One of Israel. Your God is no capricious power that can be manipulated by the right magic. Yours is a righteous God, maker of heaven and earth, whose righteousness is part of a universal order.

This theological heritage was no small matter to live with. It was no small gift to bear to the world.

However, here and there in the writings of the people of Israel there is a protest that the righteous don't always prosper—at least, not immediately. In Jeremiah you have a preacher whose heart breaks because of the disobedience of his people. In Ezekiel you have the report that God is looking for someone to take responsibility for faults in the social fabric. And now this passage on the suffering servant!

What is it doing in the middle of what often sounds like never-say-die

nationalism? What can possibly have given rise to these remarks? Who is it about? The blinded king Zedekiah? Some other leader of the people? The people of Israel themselves or a remnant of them? Or is it the unknowing repetition of some divine dictation foretelling the life of Jesus Christ? Or is it all of these? I don't know. I think we will never know the answers to these questions.

But we do know that in the context of the Babylonian exile, with the bitter death of hope and the birth of a new hope, this notion got put forward—that *God's servant suffered*. God's servant was *called* to suffer.

Verses 13-15 admit that such is an astonishing matter. People are going to stand around dumbfounded. A rejected one, an afflicted one, a grieving one, was God's servant. An innocent sufferer is called God's chosen one.

God is seen as having something to do with suffering besides inflicting it on the wicked. It is the lot of those who care, as well as of those who disobey. God's righteousness is seen as seeking restoration and not just a balance of accounts. God is seen not only as just and patient and faithful but also as loving the erring one. Suffering is seen as having a redemptive role.

In most cases with us, whenever we encounter unjust suffering, the cry goes up, "How can God be a loving God?" Israel's breakthrough to the penetrating insight that God is love *came* when it was confronted by innocent suffering.

Thanksgiving

Gracious God,
When was the last time we waved
at you, let alone shouted hosanna?

It's astonishing how feeble our praise is.

But base gratitude is no cure.

When we let the mystery of creation
interrupt our business,
we are lost in wonder.

When we let the goodness of life
overwhelm our grumbling,
we discover all your works praising you.

The trees speak, the hills give back
the sound
and the seas clap their hands.

When our lives are shaken down by
the intrusion of some human reality,
we give thanks to you for discovered treasure.

When grief invades our indifference,
we bless you for the gift of caring
for another.

When we see your glory in the face of
Jesus Christ,

we wonder where we can borrow
the language to thank you.

When we see what you are like with
us, even while we are your enemy,
we join the angels and archangels in
amazed song:

Heaven and earth are full of your
glory,

Glory be to you, O God most high.

Amen

The Second Sunday of Lent

Fancy meeting God here!

Isaiah 61: 1-4

The preaching of Isaiah of the exile is famous for its servant songs. The writers of the Christian scriptures constantly refer to them. The early Christians used these servant songs to describe the significance of Jesus.

Other preachers in Israel had talked about the Lord's anointed. All the cultures of the known civilized world at the time considered the king to be God's anointed one. In this regard Israel was no different. But Israel's prophets called the king *to do God's justice* as God's anointed one.

Isaiah's servant metaphor made a subtle change in the concept of "anointed one". It also made room for some changes in Israel's understanding of God's righteousness.

The scripture passage of today's reflection comes from the preaching during the restoration. Release by Cyrus had come in 583 BC. But there was no great rush to rebuild Jerusalem. It took a lot of encouragement to bestir even a few of the exiles to leave Babylon, return home and begin to rebuild the city and temple.

Is the preacher here doing nothing more than claiming God's sanction for restoring the city? Is he just attempting to stir enthusiasm in the reluctant patriots? Whatever the

preacher had in mind, his words have taken on greater meaning. The writers of the Christian scriptures used this passage to identify Christ's ministry. Luke has Jesus refer to this passage in his first public act of ministry. He sees Jesus' ministry as identifying with the poor, the afflicted, the captive and the blind.

It seems to me this is a proper inference from this passage. Herein we see what is really called for from God's anointed one. In all the preaching of all the prophets God is shown as being concerned that justice be done to all those who had been unjustly done by. But with the exilic preachers God's concern appears to gain a sharper point. God is seen as taking *responsibility* for the afflicted, the captives, the broken-hearted, the prisoners. Recall what Ezekiel said about God's looking for someone to stand in the breach of the wall so that the city would not have to be destroyed. Add the oracle of the suffering servant we read yesterday.

This all adds up to the fact that God's anointed one is called to be *identified* with not only the afflicted, the captive, the prisoners, *but also with the sinner*.

God's way of dealing with sin and suffering is to bear it. It seems there is a way of relating to human sin and sorrow whereby you get to be with God.

Benediction

Almighty God,

this is a request for your blessing.

Our first praying was like this.

"God bless Mummy, God bless Daddy, God bless everyone."

And our last praying will be the same.

Our lives need blessing.

By the time your good gifts get touched by our hands they are tainted.

By the time our good deeds get done there is something wrong with them.

Our generosity gets contaminated with extravagance;
our conservation corrupted with miserliness;
our helping hands hide aggression;
our letting-go masks neglect.

God bless the gifts you have bestowed upon us, bless our use of them.

God bless the work of our hands, make of it a blessing to others.

God bless our loving, may it bless those we love.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Monday

Don't comfort me

Matthew 2: 13-18

You can get a good idea of what the Christian faith is all about from the songs and stories of Christ's nativity. For centuries, writers of every tongue and age have found them irresistible. They are replete with simple and telling detail. Shepherds and kings and flight in the night. A young woman, in travail far from home, gives birth in a stable.

What is most captivating about the stories are the reversals they set forth. Royalty has a radically humble birth. The very town that is named in prophecy as the birthplace of the promised king has no house-room for his birth. The lowly are exalted and the exalted are brought low. The hungry are filled and the well-fed are sent away empty. The Word became flesh. And these stories maintain their captivating charm year after year through the centuries, no matter how familiar they become.

But when you take them all in, you find they do not make a charming bundle. We have managed to charm away the rush of fear felt upon the announcement to Mary, and the shining of the glory of the Lord upon the shepherds. We are inclined to pass up Simeon's warning and we block out the slaughter of the innocents.

Simeon is that faithful old Israelite who had been promised he would live to see the Lord's Christ. Upon seeing

the baby Jesus and his parents in the temple he is ready to depart in peace. He blesses the parents and says to Mary,

"Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword shall pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

Luke 2: 34b-35

The salvation talked about here contains something deeper than charming reversals.

It includes divisiveness, penetrating revelations and painful relationships.

The slaughter of all the male children of Bethlehem is an even more jarring piece. This kind of violence has not departed the human scene. Our own times confront us with an overwhelming number of slaughtered innocents. Sometimes it is the direct action of tyrants, sometimes the indirect outcome of virtuously defended national policy and sometimes the accumulated result of a mass of little human neglects. This kind of violence is a fact of human existence and is enormously shattering.

In telling the Bethlehem story the writer of Matthew quotes a passage from Jeremiah as a kind of reflective comment.

A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachael weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,
because they were no more.

I find this a profoundly appropriate comment. If you are going to put

together God's love of the world and the way the world is, then there is no way you are going to be consoled about some things. Nor is there any call to be.

If God loves the world, the state of mourning can be a blessed state.

Thy Kingdom Come

Almighty God

The world needs praying for.

Its suffering and pain are beyond us.

There is so much beauty and promise to it but it goes so terribly wrong.

Its people are such a mixture of bravery and cowardice,

nobility and selfishness, kindness and cruelty, tenderness and violence.

We shut out the world.

We collapse under its weight.

We run with little remedies.

We punish ourselves with gloom.

There is nothing for it but to pray and pray and pray and not faint as you said.

Almighty God, hear our prayer.

Your Kingdom come.

Your Kingdom come.

until that prayer fills all our hearts;
until readiness to receive your
kingdom fills all our hearts;
until faithfulness to our particular
call fills all our days.

Amen

Tuesday

The short trip from God to Satan

Matthew 16: 13-23

The biblical texts selected for this week's reflection are taken from Matthew and Mark. Some texts are found in both Gospels. It is very hard to escape the conclusion that the author of Matthew used Mark as one of his sources. The similarities in text are too exact, even to parenthetical remarks, to allow for a different conclusion. It is also apparent that Matthew does little altering of the material. The common material reflects a common tradition.

Luke, the other Gospel writer who seems to have depended on Mark's document, is a little more ready to make alterations. The material common to these Gospels shows hints of varying traditions.

John's Gospel reflects a very different tradition from that of the first three. However, all four gospels have in common the tradition which attributes large significance to the last week of Jesus' life. Passion week takes up a large part of the record. These first Christians seemed to be interested in recording not simply Jesus' teaching and healing powers, but especially the significance of his life. For them, what people came to think of him made the difference. Their point in writing was not just to proclaim that here was a teacher worthy of following, but that here

was the Lord's anointed one. Therefore, Jesus' suffering and death was of utmost significance.

The story of Peter's confession, followed almost immediately by his resistance, is a parable of the message the Gospel writers are attempting to communicate.

When Peter bursts out with his confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," he is called the rock foundation of the church, because the revelation could have come to him only from God. This is what the church is all about: that people get this message from God. This is what changes things: when people come to see the glory of God in Jesus Christ. And only God can make that point.

Almost in the same breath as they tell of Peter's affirmation, both Matthew and Mark tell of his resistance. Jesus begins at this time to show his disciples that he must suffer many things and be killed. Peter, equally forthright as he was in his affirmation, will have none of it.

"God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you."

That's not fit treatment for the Christ, the Son of God.

There follows Jesus' severe rebuke of Peter.

"Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men."

We resist the point God is trying to make in Christ until we see this rejected one, this suffering one, this

crucified one, as the glory of God.

Confession

O Holy One, with whom all life has to do,

Our conscience is afraid of all kinds of things,

or we wouldn't be so defensive.

Our hearts have hardened about all kinds of things,

or we wouldn't be so unfeeling.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves for we are alienated all over the place.

We are alienated from each other as individual persons;

from one another as classes and peoples;

from the creation;

and from ourselves, our bodies and our meanings.

All because we are alienated from you.

Dear God

What we have been trusting, isn't saving us;

We'd like to put things right between us.

But only you can do that.

Have mercy upon us,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Wednesday

Look who made it!

Mark 10: 32-40

In the history of Christianity the apostles came to an exalted position. These were the ones to whom the original witness had been entrusted. They came to be seen as authorities, by whose word the original gospel was distinguished from distortions of the gospel.

It is remarkable, therefore, how frequently the early tradition records the obtuseness and resistance of the inmost circle of disciples. Once Jesus' teaching concentrated on his upcoming arrest and execution, there is less and less understanding on the part of the 12. In yesterday's text we saw this lack of understanding expressed in Peter's rebuke of Jesus.

To-day's verses are placed by both Matthew and Mark at the start of the group's last trip to Jerusalem. Jesus is walking ahead of the rest and there is amazement and fear among his followers. He tells them again of his expectation of what is to happen to him and he receives as much hearing as if the wind had carried all his words away.

Two leading disciples want a word with him. They have something very different in mind. Their request generates great indignation among the others.

"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you...Grant us to sit, one at your right hand

and one at your left, in your glory.”

But Jesus says to them,

“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

In other words, Do you know the kind of glory you are asking to be part of?

Do you know the kind of greatness you are asking to have manifest in you? The great among you must be your servant, the first among you slave of all.

The reply comes back, readily enough. “We are able.”

This next is the best part of the story. Jesus, on the eve of his passion, in the total loneliness of his isolation, tells these two unhearing power-seekers who have thoughtlessly blurted out, “O we’re prepared for all that”,

The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.”

I don’t know what moves me more about this passage: its revelation of Jesus’ patience or its witness to the hidden promise in these two climbers. Perhaps they are not two different things.

If these two followers can move from their uncomprehending blindness to genuine discipleship, then you and I can. The promise is in us, also.

And the promise is in us because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Offering

Giver of all,

We are good at grasping and hoarding, but we are not very good at giving gifts.

Therefore we don’t bring a very fit offering. But it’s right that we try.

It’s right that we attempt some outward and visible recognition of the givenness of life.

It’s right that we acknowledge that we live at the expense of other lives.

It’s right that we recognize that to you alone belongs the majesty and that we are not the centre of the universe.

It’s right that we acknowledge our sinful lives before you so that you can cleanse them.

It’s right that we offer our good works to you so that you can bless them.

We surrender to you, almighty God, our title to accomplish our own salvation and the salvation of the world.

We offer you our broken faithfulness. Use it to fulfill your gracious purposes.

Nourish the seed of faith in us.

Amen

Thursday

Mother hen's lament

Matthew 23: 37-39

Both Matthew and Luke record this lament over Jerusalem. Matthew locates it during passion week, following some very strong criticism of the scribes and Pharisees. Luke puts it earlier in Jesus' ministry, between a warning by a friendly Pharisee that Herod was planning to have Jesus killed and a controversy with other Pharisees over the question of healing on the Sabbath. In both cases, the settings enhance the moving power of the passage.

The *lament* has long held a significant place in the history of human expression. When language is found to give eloquent expression to sorrow, a great treasure has been found. When music has the quality of enabling genuine grief, a great gift has been given.

I will never forget a lecture given by Dr. Crump Miller on the history of jazz, in which he pointed out the many connections between that music and black American evangelical Christianity. He discussed the funeral marches of the late Louis Armstrong and then, before he played the lament from one of them, he said: "Listen to this and then tell me whether you would be more able to do your grief-work to that melody or to 'Abide with me'."

I had just returned from a distant city where my wife had been admitted to hospital suffering a severe breakdown. Our children and I had no idea

what we were in for, or what we had been responsible for. I was in a state of shock, understanding nothing and feeling nothing. That lament permitted me to do my "grief-work". It enabled me to endure events, past and current. It enabled me to accept, rather than reject, what I was experiencing.

Laments can differ in what they are about as well as in the quality of their eloquence. David's lament at the death of Saul and Jonathan (II Samuel 1: 19-27) is eloquent indeed. Its subject is the death of public figures who were friends. Jeremiah's lament, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" is over a different matter—grief at his people's waywardness. A love of sinners is prompting that grief. Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is all that, grief stemming from the love of sinners, but with the added gravity that the beloved sinners are seeking his life. While steadfastly setting his face towards the Jerusalem which will execute him, he grieves in love over the city.

In an earlier reflection we saw how penetrating the image of *travail* could be to the heart of God, especially if we could listen with the ears of a woman who had given birth. In today's text we have another metaphor that will work even better if we can hear it with the ears of a mother:

"How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"

I can remember discovering, on my first student field, how big a problem a broody hen was to an egg producer.

I heard housewives discussing ways to cure a broody hen. Broody hens weren't satisfied with producing breakfasts for someone else, they wanted to produce a family.

In exploring the connection between sin and suffering and the Good News, is there any word in the notion that God is like a broody hen?

Thanksgiving

O God of steadfast love,
how right and good it is to give thanks; things are as they should be when we do. But we have learned that being grateful because we should is neither right nor good.

Dear God, a grateful heart is a gift or it is not real at all.

A grateful heart transforms life.
It turns life into a mysterious gift,
and precious in our sight.

It opens our heart to wonder and surprise

It lets us revel in sight and sound.
It permits us to love another.

Dear God, it's because you are there when we turn to you, that we dare embrace life. It's because you believe in us that we can freely accept the gift of life. It's because you love the world that we can take it to our hearts.

Gracious God, it's all because of you that our hearts can sing.
Turn loose our praise.

Amen

Friday

Where have you been, Lord?

Matthew 25: 31-46

This parable of the Last Judgement is recorded in Matthew's Gospel only. The evangelist locates it, along with two other well-known parables, following a collection of Jesus' teaching about the last things. Many of us who read this were raised in a Christian tradition that ignored matters such as the second coming. We left it to the literalists and the adventists to pay attention to such teaching. I can remember how surprised I was when critical biblical studies first revealed to me that the one thing you could be sure about was that Jesus paid significant attention to such things.

Once you stop closing your eyes to that material, you see it everywhere in the New Testament. It was a distinctive and essential part of the faith of the first Christians. The Christ had come in Jesus and was about to come again. The Kingdom of God was in their midst and was about to break in. Christ was reigning Lord but they prayed to him as if he were absent. "Come, Lord Jesus!"

These three parables in the 25th chapter of Matthew can be seen as parables of the absent king. There is the parable of the wise and foolish virgins which calls for the state of watchfulness on the part of the faithful. It is not that you possess God fully, but that you live as though God were about to appear. There is the parable of the man who left his servants with various responsibilities.

Though absent, he was very present in the tasks he left behind. Finally there is the parable of the last judgement, which we love to tell but don't hear very well. This absent king, what has he been doing all this time? He has been hiding, identified with the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned.

We have heard something like this before. We looked at a passage from Isaiah during the second week of the study, where God is made out to have particular interest in such people. Indeed, the whole prophetic tradition makes that point. But this is a little stronger, this is identification.

All these are characteristics of the life in Christ: Watchfulness for the sudden appearing of the reigning Lord, responsibilities we are left with on our own, and the reigning Lord hidden in our midst, identified with the least.

We live in a hurting world. Suffering, injustice and violence abound. But depression and paralysis need not be the only result of confronting these face to face, for when we comfort and embrace the people who endure them, we comfort and embrace the Saviour of the world.

Speak Lord

Everlasting God,

at whose almighty word creation dawned, we need your word to speak to us, we stop our noise and our light, to listen.

God, give us ears to hear the word you have for our hearts.

Call us to our true being.

Put our chaos and darkness to flight.
Order our lives in the way they should go.

Lighten our darkness with the true light.

Keep our faithfulness green with your living water.

Nourish our loving with the bread of life.

Reach our hearts with your reconciling word, O God for it is in our estrangement from you that all our evil and pain is rooted.

Speak the word that gives us to each other and to the world you love.

Witness in our hearts to your glory and power in Jesus your Christ, the Word made flesh.

God, speak, your servants are listening.

Amen

Saturday

The proof of sonship reversed

Matthew 27: 33-44

A characteristic of the Gospel is that it is always news. It never ceases to surprise us. It is always turning things into their opposites. And even if we have heard it before, it surprises us because, as the gospel song puts it, "I forget so soon." The better we understand the story the more fully we

realize that we need to hear it often, for it proclaims a profoundly radical reversal. Our text for today was chosen because it contains eloquent witness to just how radical that reversal is.

We have already seen how much trouble the inner circle had with Jesus' understanding of the fate he was to undergo. When the execution finally came, it was a blow to all their hopes. It is said that they all forsook him and fled. The one they thought was going to put everything right didn't make it.

Note the crowd's reported behaviour at the crucifixion. People, soldiers, leaders and criminals wag their heads and rail at him:

"You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself!"

"If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!"

"He saved others, he cannot save himself!"

"He is the king of Israel; let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him."

We understand this sentiment very well. If you were God's glory this wouldn't be happening to you. How can we believe in you when you can save others but not save yourself? If you got yourself out of this fix, we might see how you could be God's anointed one.

But the Gospel message is the opposite of all that; and that is what makes such good news. It is the one who saves others and cannot save himself that is the window of God's glory. It

is *because* he is God's anointed one that Jesus got into that fix. If God loves the world, including its sinners, then the role of God's Chosen One is exactly that. Less than that will not be big enough news for the salvation of the world.

For 10 years I was on the staff of a downtown mission in Vancouver. One of the blessings of that decade was the presence of Lieutenant Christine McMillan, a young Salvation Army officer who ran a program for street people. "Crosswalk" was a warm, imaginative, accepting program, like its director. Vancouver's skid road was not an easy place for a mother hen to gather her brood. Christine won an amazing response among the men. But women of the street, who were the object in starting her program, did not gather.

Christine sang a song at one of our Downtown Eastside Clergy retreats, accompanying herself on the guitar. I'll never forget the title of that song, "He makes the woeful heart to sing". That's when healing goes deep—when the woeful heart is taught, not to forget, but to sing. And it's the glory of God revealed in the one who cannot save himself that can teach the woeful heart to sing.

Petition

Father and Mother of all,

We aren't anybody until we're heard.

It's vital to us that we get heard.

Hear our prayers and let our cries come unto you.

Hear our prayer for our loved ones:
We delight in them. We ache with
dreams on their behalf.

We long to bless them. We want
rid of them.

We want our love to make a
difference with them and we
worry when it does.

Hear our prayer for our undertakings:
those tasks close to our hearts to
which we give ourselves and which
make us vulnerable. We are paralysed by the fear of failure and haunted by the emptiness of success.

Hear our prayers for the world:

There is so much wrong with it, we
are afraid to look.

Terror stalks the lives of vast
numbers of people.

Masses of people go hungry, even
unto death.

Overwhelming numbers of people
face a lifetime of homelessness.

We who share the planet with all
the life neglect the care of it.

We who share the planet with
other humans refused to do so,
except by violently contesting
together.

The cries go up from children of the
earth in all parts of the world.

Hear their cries!

As we know they are heard we can
bear to hear them ourselves,
and begin to find our true meaning
and home as participants
in your love of the world.

Amen

The Third Sunday of Lent

God is in God-forsakenness

Mark 15: 33-39

Throughout this Lenten study we keep talking about reversals and contradictions and things that turn into their opposites. Yet they are central to the Christian faith. We need to keep talking about them because any old contradiction is not an expression of the Christian faith. Nor is the Christian message gibberish. There is one Christian contradiction, and it is profoundly meaningful. All the Christian contradictions are variations of one basic paradox. A summary formulation in words is found in the prologue to John's Gospel.

"The Word became flesh."

Today's text from Mark's Gospel contains the same profound message in dramatic form. Early in the history of the church it received its own name—"The Cry of Dereliction".

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Mark and Matthew are the only Gospels which record it.

Throughout the history of the church this cry of dereliction has received a great deal of attention. Why did the other evangelists not record it? How seriously are we to take it? The line is a quotation from Psalm 22. Throughout the whole psalm the mood changes from urgent supplication to

grateful assurance. If the crier knew the psalm, does this mean the quote is not an expression of radical abandonment? From earliest times the church had trouble with the notion of radical abandonment. How can God's chosen one experience being abandoned by God?

Now and again in the history of Christianity, the original central message of the Gospel has been recovered just at the point when the cry of dereliction was allowed its most radical interpretation.

It came to mean such to that monk, Martin Luther, who for years vainly strove to be reconciled to God through work and penance, only to discover that the saving message of the Bible was that *God was in God-forsakenness*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian who profoundly influenced Christian thought in the 1960's. He wrote the following lines from prison shortly before he was executed for taking part in the conspiracy to assassinate Adolph Hitler:

So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15: 34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.

He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.*

Who can number the pilgrims, down two thousand years, for whom the cry of dereliction came to be the vehicle of salvation?

God-forsakenness is no mild state. Only someone who has never been there would count it so. The thing about such an abyss is that there is no footing, no light, no landmarks, no directions, nothing to provide a transition to anywhere else. If you want to learn the meaning of "slight healing", try some cheap cures for God-forsakenness. Any cure for it needs to be radical.

Let no human reason take all the nonsense out of the Gospel or it won't be able to save anybody.

Benediction

Gracious God,
We bring our lives before you to receive your blessing.

We bring our striving to be good and to do good.

We do not succeed at being good, and our striving to be good gets in the way of our doing good.

Bless our hunger and thirst for righteousness.

We bring our joys and sorrows.

So much of our fun is at the expense of others, or made possible by the hardening of our hearts.

We hide from the pain and sorrow of the world and indulge in bouts of self-pity.

Bless our rejoicing and our grieving.
We bring our loving.

The more powerful our love the
more it can hide our enslavement
of the ones we love.

Bless our loving that it might be
genuine.

We bring our weariness.

We are worn out carrying the
burdens of life or fleeing from
them—some burdens of our own
making and some that you call for.

Bless our rest.

Receive us into the true rest of him
whose yoke is easy and whose burden
is light. Amen

* Reprinted by permission of SCM
Press, London, extract from Dietrich
Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from
Prison*, The Enlarged Edition, 1971

Monday

What's the father waiting for?

Luke 15: 11-32

This week we reflect on readings from the Gospels of Luke and John. John's Gospel is very different from the others. But Luke's is enough like Matthew's and Mark's that it generates interest in comparing them. Our attention is caught by what Luke leaves out—such as Jesus' cry of dereliction that the other two include. Attention

is equally aroused by the material that is unique to him, such as the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son. With care we can begin to get a sense of what Luke had ears for, among the things remembered about Jesus' ministry.

All the Lukan readings we use this week are from material unique to him. Today's selection tells one of several parables that only Luke records—the parable of the prodigal son. It is probably better named the parable of the waiting father, for the father has some waiting to do in the case of both sons.

An enormous amount of study has gone into the parables of Jesus, and rightly so. Of all the material in the records, they are the most revealing of his thought. Tales and fables with moral meanings have had extensive use down the ages. Allegories, with hidden meanings understood only by the initiated, also have had a long and creative use. But Jesus' parables cannot be made to belong to either of these types, even if the church began very early to try to do that very thing. Jesus' parables are a type unto themselves. They are stories of familiar every-day occurrences, which get the listener nodding in familiar recognition, but which suddenly explode with surprising implications.

An example in which we can most clearly see the parable at work is the story of the lost sheep. "Which one of you, if you lost one of a hundred sheep, wouldn't look all night for it and have a party when you found it?" This is not introduced as some kind of special behaviour. It is assumed

any one of Jesus' listeners would have done the same. And while they are all nodding in agreement, the story explodes. That is how God feels about a sinner who repents.

As we turn to the parable of the waiting father, where does the most surprising twist come? I think it is at the point where we are all feeling that the elder son got a raw deal. The wastrel gets the party, the steady worker gets to work steadily. What if the point of the story is to reveal a revolutionary notion of God's righteousness?

If God's righteousness is such that it is fulfilled when the punishment fits the crime, then the elder brother got a raw deal. But if God's righteousness is such that it is fulfilled only when the broken world is reconciled, then the elder brother is resisting God's righteousness. The father has more waiting to do.

If the life of Jesus Christ and his parables are a window into God's righteousness, what kind of clue are they to the puzzle of distinguishing between right and wrong? It seems that the whole matter of right and wrong comes under a different kind of scrutiny when you discover that the goal of God's righteousness is reconciliation.

Speak Lord

Eternal God,

Your Word is a firm foundation.

Get through to us with your Word.
When we live a life that's called for,
there's nothing to fear,

neither pain, nor failure, nor prin-
cipalities nor powers,
nor any creature.

Get through to us with your Word.

We might protest and resist, but it will be good to have a firm place on which to stand.

Your Word is truth.

If we can face the truth about
ourselves we will have nothing
to fear.

Get through to us with your just
judgement and plant our feet
on the rock of truth.

Your Word is living and abiding.

You commended your loving to us
in the life, death and resurrec-
tion of Christ.

Get through to us with your ever-
lasting love. If we can learn to
love we'll have nothing to fear.

Our distress will be sanctified and
our weariness find rest.

O Holy Spirit, witness within us to
the glory of God in the face of Jesus
Christ.

Amen

Tuesday

Keeping the right company

Luke 19: 1-10

In two previous reflections we dealt with what came to be a central biblical theme—that God has a special interest in the poor, the powerless, the imprisoned and the victims of injustice. In Matthew's parable (Matthew 25: 31-46) Christ is identified with the least. When we neglect

to serve these, we neglect to serve Jesus Christ.

I am not sure we are very convinced of this; that is, I am not sure we live very much of the time as if we believed it were true. But I think most of us would agree that God's identification with the least is a fine, noble notion.

Today's story presents us with an identification of a different quality. A great many of the good people of Jesus' day did not approve of this identification whatsoever. I am sure most of us can appreciate their disapproval.

The publicans of Jesus' time were an alienated class of people throughout the Roman empire. Members of the conquered peoples, they collected taxes for the occupying power. They had the protection of the army of occupation. They were required to deliver a stated amount to the imperial power and anything they collected over and above constituted their remuneration. The ceiling was whatever they could get away with. It takes little imagination to picture the relationship between these publicans and their compatriots. The Gospel records repeat a phrase that must have been in common use—"publicans and sinners".

Zacchaeus was one of these publicans. He was also short. In a crowd he would have no chance of getting into a position where he could size up Jesus. So he climbed a tree. Jesus addressed him in what Zacchaeus thought was his safe perch. "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for I must stay at your house

today." We know the story has a happy ending. Zacchaeus received Jesus joyfully, unloaded his ill-gotten gains and gave half his wealth to the poor. Jesus said of him, "Today, salvation has come to this house." Accompanying that outcome is another scene:

And when they saw it they all murmured, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

Jesus could not befriend this despised one without becoming tainted. Yet it was this identification with publicans and sinners that proved to be a main factor in alienating Jesus from the community leaders. It was a big factor in his rejection.

That God is identified with sinners is a shattering notion.

It will always be news.

But it is the only news that is adequate to heal.

Confession

Gracious God,
we are coming before you to ask your forgiveness.

There is not other way for us to be born again.

There is no other way we can get to be somebody without damage to others.

There is no other way for us to accept our true selves.

There is no other way we can be responsible for anything without destroying it.

There is no other way we can love without danger to our loved ones.

There is no other way we can defeat the hosts of hell.

There is no other way for us to be reconciled to you in whom is life eternal.

We bring our lives,
the way they are lived and
what they are lived for, to you to
be forgiven.

For it is as forgiven sinners that we
are safe and right.

It is as forgiven sinners that we are
given to each other.

It is as forgiven sinners that we are
entrusted with your ministry of
reconciliation.

Amen

Wednesday

Blessed incompleteness

Luke 12: 49-53

Both Matthew and Luke report that Jesus said, "Don't think I came to bring peace on the earth." It's an uncomfortable thought. We wish it weren't part of the record. The saying can be used to justify all sorts of futile wranglings. It can be used to legitimate all sorts of stubborn self-righteousness. Its true meaning cannot even be approached if we take the remark out of the context of the total life and teaching of Jesus.

At the same time it cannot quite be gotten rid of. Identifying with sinners is a divisive thing to do in most socie-

ties. And it is a painful thing to love sinners at the same time as you uphold rightness.

Luke prefaces these uncomfortable words with two sentences from the lips of Jesus that he alone records. They break into the text out of nowhere and appear to be spoken to no one in particular. They have the sound of inner reflections which have bubbled up into audible expression because some inner connection was made. I find them very revealing of the person of Jesus.

"I came to cast fire upon the earth;
and would that it were already
kindled!

I have a baptism to be baptized
with; and how I am constrained
until it is accomplished!"

These words also speak to every one of us who has ever taken up any serious responsibility. To embark, even in the most modest fashion, on a pilgrimage to discover one's purpose in life is to enter the disturbing space between constraint and accomplishment.

I have been thankful many times that Luke included these sentences in his record, as I often find myself painfully impaled between constraint and fulfillment. In living out my life, especially if I let the world in, I am overwhelmed by all that's called for and all that's not getting done. A person could be ground to bits by that kind of burden. But these words remind me whose company I am in. They invite me to discover again that to be impaled between constraint and accomplishment is the state of salvation. If it is God's call, it's enough to

be called; to be between the call and its accomplishment is to be in touch with the living God.

A remark made to me outside a downtown mission church in Vancouver brought me a clear understanding of how such things can be.

I was ushering one of the regular users of our facilities down the steps. He was the kind that caught your heart and tried your patience. Alcohol had claimed him and was destroying his mind and body. It was obvious that he had been well educated, but now he hardly ever uttered a coherent sentence. And he was a nuisance, tying up the phone and the office receptionist to no discernible purpose. Thus the regular practice of ushering him down the steps.

"God bless you, Frenchie," I said as I passed him through the door. He spoke the one, clear, coherent sentence I ever heard him utter. "You know better than that; God only blesses those who please him."

Between the call to get through to him with a different word, and accomplishment that he be reached with it, is a painful place to be. It puts a burden on you. But can you see how it is a glorious burden. That burden doesn't tire you out; it keeps you going.

Thy Kingdom Come

Almighty God,

All our crying for your kingdom to come feels as if we are washing our hands of the mess that's here

now. You fix it.

You put it right

You finish the job.

All that praying can be our way of saying, "Get it off our backs!"

Right enough. We'd like it off our backs—this messed-up world with its confusion confounded by the zealous application of conflicting solutions.

But it doesn't feel right to get it off our backs. It is our brothers and sisters that are suffering and we can't quite escape the thought that we have contributed to the mess.

There is no question, we long for a state that's not here now. Have you put that longing there? Is that what your servants of old meant by "seeking a city that is to come"? Will having no lasting city here empower us to care unceasingly for this one? Will that get the world off our backs and into our arms?

Gracious God, hear our cry — Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen

Thursday

Who'd long to be at that feast?

Luke 22: 14-37

All four gospel writers make a big thing of the last supper. They do not all record it in the same way. John is unique in his report of the washing of the disciples feet and in his recording of Jesus' long discourse and long prayer. In Matthew, Mark and Luke the action at the meal table is given central significance. It is linked with his sacrificial death and his separation from them.

"Take, eat, this is my body broken for you... This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many. I shall not drink again of the vine until that day when I drink it again in the kingdom of God."

For all four writers the night is a watershed, a last time together before the catastrophe. But it was a troubled intimacy, marred by rejections, offence-taking and betrayal. All four evangelists record Jesus' prediction that one of them would betray him and that Peter would deny him before morning.

Luke's report includes an additional jarring note. Jesus' warning about his imminent betrayal precipitates a dispute among the disciples over who is to be the greatest. Other evangelists include the material but Luke alone has it taking place during the last supper.

We all know how hard it is to have a party go right. We can all recount horror stories of parties that went wrong. We are all familiar with how

the threat of disaster works to keep entertaining tense and at a superficial level, or to cause us to avoid it altogether.

But this last supper was something special. It marked the disastrous end of Jesus' ministry. What that ministry had been about was to cost Jesus everything. He was on the eve of being utterly isolated and this was his last get-together with the only crowd he had. Nothing about the occasion indicated that anyone in that room had any understanding of what he had been about. How wrong can a party go?

Now take another look at Luke's record of the get-together. He is the only evangelist to begin the story with these words of Jesus.

"I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer."

In the original Greek the above sentence is even more poignant. "*With desire* I have desired to eat this passover with you." The adverb is from the same root word as the verb.

Can you imagine why Jesus would have doubly desired to have the feast with that crowd at that significant moment? There can be only one explanation. He loved them.

Can you imagine the kind of love that would make Jesus want to be at that party? That's how God loves us.

Praise

Almighty God,

Bless you for the gift of creation,
and for those who open its wonder
and mystery to us. How good it is

to stand in amazement and delight.

Bless you for the gift of loved ones. They can be a trial to us and we to them, but how precious they are to our sight. The gift of love is the chief wonder of life and we bless you for it.

Bless you for the brave ones of the world, whom to know is to be uplifted and to be made glad that we belong to the human race.

Bless you for the host of witnesses through whom knowledge of you broke into our history.

Bless you for using such earthly human means for pursuing us with your truth and confronting us with your salvation.

Bless you, whose glory we behold in the face of Jesus Christ.

No other glory can reach us in the darkness of our souls.

No other glory has the power to give us to each other and restore us to a love of the world.

Praise be to God.

Amen

Friday

What one thief saw

Luke 23: 32-43

Last week we reflected on a very similar reading. It was Matthew's account of the crucifixion of Jesus. We reflected on the irony of the mocking jeers shouted by members of the crowd: "He saved others, he cannot save himself." "He is the King of Israel, let him come down from the cross and we will believe in him." "He trusts in God, let God deliver him now, for he said 'I am the son of God.'" The robbers who were crucified with him joined in the chorus.

The story is told as though no one present got the point. We have come to see that all the things that were said about Jesus that were supposed to prove that he was *not* the Christ were of the very essence of his *being* the Christ. But at the time of the crucifixion, nobody understood; not the soldiers, the religious leaders, the disciples, nor any members of the crowd. Both Matthew and Mark report that, at his arrest, the disciples forsook Jesus and fled.

However, when you put all the accounts together, insight is not totally lacking. There is a glimmer here and there of understanding. In Luke's account, the centurion in command of the core of Roman soldiers, when he saw how Jesus died, praised God and said, "Truly this was a righteous man!" What is it that Luke has ears for here? Why would anyone praise God when he saw crucifixion being done to a righteous man?

Further, in Luke's account there is another interesting variation. His record has it that one of the criminals joined in the general derision, but that the other did not, saying,

"Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Here we have someone who thought that one who suffered a sentence of condemnation unjustly had a kingdom he was going to. Here we have someone who wants to join such a kingdom. He came to be called "the penitent thief". The church gave him a name and made him a saint.

It seems to me that Luke reveals an ear for the essential faith in the way in which he recounts these stories. This centurion and this criminal are the first believers. Instead of seeing something to curse God about as they observe this unjust suffering of a righteous man, the one sees something to praise God about, the other sees into the heart of God's desirable kingdom.

Petition

Holy God,
hear our prayer for the church.
Pour out your Holy Spirit on the church,

so that it will recognize your glory
in the crucified one;
so that it cannot use its piety to
escape you;

so that it cannot use its authority
to tyrannize people;
so that it never ceases to attack
the gates of hell;
so that it never uses its power of
the keys to exclude anyone;
so that it becomes a high and
lifted-up witness to your love of
sinners.

Dear God, we are praying for *us*, not
about *them*, as though the church
were someone else.

Come upon us, Holy Spirit.

Witness in our hearts to the glory
of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
Reconcile us to each other, and
pour through us your ministry of
reconciliation.

Almighty God,

hear our prayer for the state; for
those who govern nations and
communities. Reign, o righteous
one, in the hearts and minds of
those who have power because of
wealth or political position.

Give them ears to hear the cries of
the needy,
eyes to see unjust conditions,
courage to confront evil and
corruption,
wisdom in dealing with complex
issues,
humility to recognize loyal
opposition,
strength, so that they weary not in
well doing.

Dear God, we are praying for us, not
for them as though we were not part
of the state.

Come Holy Spirit, witness to the
approach of God's kingdom and keep
us watchful for its sudden appear-
ance, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Saturday

Living bread

John 6: 26-59

For today and Sunday, we reflect on readings from John's Gospel. The writer sets forth the theme of this book in the prologue.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

The words are so familiar they no longer shake us. They are shocking nonetheless. That is some message—*the word became flesh!* As far as words can go in expressing it, these words are the summary statement of the central Christian contradiction.

Much of our experience with flesh leads us to the conviction that the only good news regarding it would be the provision of an escape from it. It is in our life in the flesh that we sin and suffer.

But it is also where we love and work, and an escape from the flesh would be cheap healing. A deeper healing would be possible if the Word became flesh. What a miracle that would be!

The way these early Christians write about the flesh is most revealing. They clearly consider the flesh as a problem, cursed or corrupted or in some way alienated from God. They continually speak of the conflict between life according to the flesh and life according to the spirit. But at the same time they speak of flesh as being at the heart of the matter. Flesh

is given a central role in God's work of salvation.

I didn't select our reading from the sixth chapter of John because I thought I knew exactly what it meant, but because the author is obviously trying very hard to say something. In connection with the feeding of the five thousand he has Jesus trying to distinguish between the food the crowd sought him for and the true bread of life. John's Gospel is made up of a whole series of long discourses or dialogues in which an attempt is made to penetrate through misunderstandings to fine distinctions. In this dialogue John uses 25 verses trying to make the point. As it proceeds there is an increasing lack of receptivity on the part of the listeners until everyone but the 12 has left. And they confess they have nowhere else to go.

In this discourse John is telling us that we have not come to a true understanding of Christianity until we see it as the gift of Christ's flesh. That is the true bread of life.

"The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." How fascinating: not his thoughts, or his ideas, or his spirit, but his flesh! What do you think is meant by Christ's flesh? His body, his physical presence, his walk, his face, his voice, his gaze, his touch, his relationships, his choices, his hunger and thirst, his wounds, his pain? Why is *flesh* used as the summing up of Jesus' life and ministry?

There follow even stranger words which offend almost everyone.

"Unless you eat the flesh of the son

of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Whatever in the world does John have in mind in recording these words? Why does he locate them here and not in connection with the bread and wine of the last supper? He certainly sees them as carrying a powerful message.

I invite you to let the words work. What kinds of thoughts, insights, connections, revelations come to you from the notions—

1. that Christ's salvation comes to us in his flesh; and
2. that the metaphors "to eat" and "to drink" are especially revealing of the way in which we appropriate that salvation.

Offering

Merciful God,

We present unto you our bodies, a living sacrifice.

It is with our bodies that we consume the fruit of the earth and care for its life.

It is with our bodies that we speak a word for others and receive a word from others.

It is with our bodies that we strike blows and in our bodies that we receive blows.

It is with our bodies that we touch and relate to others.

It is in our bodies that we tremble with glee and quake with terror. It is by our bodies that we are known.

If our bodies were at your disposal, if they carried your mark everything would be where it ought to be.

Receive, O God, the living sacrifice of our bodies, place your mark upon them. Amen

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Look what's called glorification

John 12: 20-33

I picked this passage for our reflection because it is one of several in his Gospel where John discloses a special understanding of what it is to be "glorified". We could also have read chapter 17, which is Jesus' long prayer during the last supper.

Both passages refer to the culmination of Jesus' life and ministry, as his glorification and this glorification of the Son of Man amounts to the glorification of God's name.

In chapter 12, there is an inescapable connection between the glorification of the Son of Man and his death on a cross. John does not suggest it is an easy connection to make for he has Jesus debate with himself whether to go through with it.

"Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?'"

But it is a reassuring connection.

"No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name."

The connection between Christ's glorification and his crucifixion is affirmed in the metaphor of the seed that remains alone unless it falls into the ground and dies, but bears much fruit if it does so.

Following the mixed reaction of the crowd to the voice from heaven, Jesus announces the judgement of

this world and the casting out of the evil ruler of this world and says,

"When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself."

The kind of death Jesus died, Christ lifted up, Christ glorified, the breaking of evil's hold on the earth—all these are seen as the same event. And God's name is glorified in that event.

In the 17th chapter the glorification that is Jesus' death is given a firm connection with his whole faithful life. Accomplishing God's work on earth was a glorification of God and it included, or was even characterized by, the death he should die.

Further, there is a connection made between Christ's followers and his glorification. Jesus says of those who received God's Word through him, however brokenly.

"All mine are thine and thine are mine and I am glorified in them."

I must confess I find the style of writing in much of John's Gospel repetitive and tiresome. But he gets worked up by notions that captivate me.

What a thing to call the life and teaching and death of Jesus and the broken faithfulness of his disciples all the glorification of God's name.

How is the death of Christ the glory of God? I think Christ's death is the glory of God when it becomes a window into the heart of God. If by Christ's death we come to see love of enemies at the heart of God, it is good and right to call that death a glorification.

Benediction

O Almighty and Eternal One
with whom we wrestle through the
night of our existence,
depart not from us until you have
blessed us.

We dread so much of life. We wrestle
with the fear of failure,
the fear of losing what is precious,
the fear of offending,
the fear of rejection, the fear of
destroying and being destroyed,
Depart not from us until you have
blessed us.

Our burden of guilt darkens our
thoughts and distorts our behaviour.
As we wrestle with the truth and
lies of our bad consciences,
depart not from us until you have
blessed us.

We continually wrestle with our call.
What are we meant to be?

What's our part in the scheme of
things?

What's worth spending our life on?

What's the name of the one with
whom all life has to do?

O Holy one, you are the one we contend with.

Don't leave until you have blessed us.

O Righteous One, we make efforts to
leave the world a better place.

But that's no simple matter. The
more committed we become, the
more alive to the world's ills and
needs, the more we are of two
minds and simple solutions escape
us.

As we wrestle with these ambiguities
we draw close to you;

don't leave us until you have
blessed us.

Dear God, even in our deepest

depression, we are working at something.

Depart not from us until you have blessed us.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Monday

Saving foolishness

I Corinthians 1: 17-25

All our readings this week are from the letters of Paul. These are remarkable documents. They had such impact on the early church that nearly all Christian writing for the next few centuries took the form of epistles.

The epistle to the Romans is the closest thing to a general theological tract that Paul wrote. The rest of his epistles are genuine letters, addressed to particular groups in particular circumstances. They are composed on the run and are most revealing of the warmth and heat of the relationship between the apostle and the people to whom he is writing. As you read the epistles of Paul you meet the writer face to face.

In these epistles you also have primary documents on the early church. This is not promotion material. This is not a story written about the first Chris-

tians. This is a glimpse *at* the first Christians. As you read these documents you watch those early Christians relate to one another, you watch them believe and discourse. If you want to be visited by a cloud of real witnesses, read Paul's epistles.

These documents are also first-class aids to theological thought. They were written because the author thought people were mishearing the gospel. He was most concerned that it be the true gospel of Jesus Christ that got heard. He took up the task of making essential distinctions.

And further to this end is the fortunate fact that a string of documents by the same author have come down to us. It is never an easy matter to know what an ancient writer with a different language and from a different culture is saying, especially when he is writing God-talk. When have you understood what he intended you to hear? When asking yourself this question, it is a great help to have before you several writings on the same subject, by the same author.

The foregoing is an argument for reading the epistles as whole pieces rather than snatching bits here and there out of them for comment. But that would have meant publishing Paul's epistles for the Lenten Booklet and someone has already published them.

However, I find even the bits eloquent expressions of the radical gospel. The preaching of the cross of Christ is the theme for today. To one group it is a stumbling block, to another foolishness. To people who look for signs of God's power, the

cross of Christ looks like failure. To people who want salvation to make their kind of sense, the cross of Christ is nonsense. But to us, who are being saved, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

In a diversion of thought, while dealing with a quarrel between adherents over who was the best leader, Paul sums up the theme of this Lenten book.

With the help of an editor, who would watch for exclusive language, Paul would have written a great Lenten book.

Offering

Lord and lover of all, receive our sacrifice of praise.

It is a sacrifice to afford you proper praise.

It means losing all our other dreads in the dread of you alone.

It means having no other gods before you, and surrendering our trust in a myriad of unreliable and dangerous saviours.

It means being excluded from all boasting, and receiving our creation and justification as a gift.

It means letting go our own righteousness and our need to be innocent, and relying on your forgiveness and grace.

It requires some dying to rely on your grace alone.

We risk everything.

But we who have tasted the kingdom know it is the pearl of great price.

We who have glimpsed the treasure, make haste to possess the land in which it is found.

Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb.

Receive our sacrifice of praise,
O God.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever.

Amen

Tuesday

It's God who justifies

Romans 3: 21-27

Of all the epistles of Paul, Romans comes closest to giving us the author's theological thought. The Church at Rome was not one of Paul's congregations. The letter appears to be a means Paul uses to introduce himself by providing a systematic expression of his theology. Romans has been called "The Gospel according to Paul". I find that five of the readings I selected for this Lenten study are from Romans. Martin Luther and Karl Barth are only two of a number of theologians who rediscovered the gospel for the church of their time by undertaking a study of Romans.

Today's passage is the first of several little summaries of the Christian message in this tract. Paul has been

discussing two classic human procedures for living the full life. First he discusses the life that seeks to satisfy desire, and then the life that seeks to order itself correctly by obeying rules. The first procedure degenerates into more and more bizarre behaviour as the person seeks to stimulate an increasingly jaded desire. The second procedure is cursed with a load of guilt as the person fails to fulfil all the requirements.

I find this a very telling analysis of everybody's predicament. I recall that when I first came across Sigmund Freud's analysis of the human predicament, I thought, "My goodness! It sounds like Romans." Freud was pessimistic about the human condition. According to him, the life that is lived for the satisfaction of desire endures so much pain that it desires to end desire. Living that way turns into a death wish. The life that is lived under the rule of conscience is driven by a bad conscience into anti-social behaviour—another kind of death wish. What makes Freud's analysis interesting to me is his claim that we are all caught up in both procedures. What makes both Paul's and Sigmund's analyses interesting to me is that I recognize myself in them.

If these are accurate analyses of the human condition, what in the world can put it right? Such a radical predicament requires a radical cure.

At this point Paul announces,
But now the righteousness of God
has been manifested apart from
the law, although the law and the
prophets bear witness to it.

A most helpful key to understanding

Paul's God-talk is this word *righteousness*. It is the same Greek word that is sometimes translated *justification*. When Paul speaks of God's righteousness, he is speaking of God's justification, of God's method of *putting right*.

And his big news is that Christ Jesus shows us God's way of putting right. We are put right by God's grace as a gift. That's the righteousness of God to which the law and the prophets bear witness. We have been studying some of these prophets. I think they have borne witness to it.

Petition

Gracious God,
Our souls have need of you and for
them we pray.

The living of our lives overwhelms us. We want to love and be loved. What else makes life worth living? But all kinds of things go wrong with our loving. We risk letting someone else matter to us and that puts us at their mercy. We come to matter to someone else and that starts to feel like entrapment. Our loving gets infected with the need to possess. Our caring grows weak when it encounters pain, and bitter when it encounters rejection. We know a little about loving sinners but it fades in us like the morning mist.

Refine our loving with the fire of your fierce love so that our caring will keep strong and without manipulation.

We want the work of our hands to accomplish good. But all kinds of things go wrong with our work. We

long for work that will justify our existence, work that will make life better on the earth. But there is no work that is not contaminated, and we are overwhelmed by all that is left to be done. On every hand there are battles to join, wrongs to be put right, needs to be met. We fuss and sweat and toil and mess up and quit.

We need to get right with you so that our work is an instrument of our will. We need your justification so that we don't manage the world as we try to justify ourselves.

Loving God,

Reconcile the world to yourself.

If your arms are beneath us
we can go in peace,
care with compassion, and
take up our task in courage.

Amen

Wednesday

While yet sinners

Romans 5: 1-11

Here we have that word again, *justification*. Take the noun righteousness and make it into a verb: righteousnessified; made righteousness; put right.

Here we have the connection made again between suffering and God's glory. Since we have been put right by faith we have peace with God through Jesus Christ. We have been

put right by God's grace as a gift. While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Here Paul reveals his understanding of the connection between Christ's suffering and God's gift.

He starts his paragraph like a Jesus parable. Who doesn't agree that hardly anyone would die for a righteous person? that someone might die for a good person? But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

That's the remarkable news. It has been peeking out ever since Ezekiel's time. God loves the righteous, everyone agrees. God loves the penitent sinner, that might take a little convincing. But this says "God shows his love for us while we were yet sinners."

This passage helped me see how it would take suffering to show us that. Further on in the passage Paul says, "If while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of Jesus..." Try to imagine what it is like to love an enemy. I am a parent whose child has chosen to stand for the opposite of everything I stand for. My child is my enemy.

What's it like to love an enemy?

Loving an enemy is not the same thing as loving the child but opposing what the child does. My child's life *is* the opposite of everything I value.

It is not the same thing to say, "It doesn't matter what my child stands for." That's not taking my child's choices seriously, or my own values seriously. That is not loving an enemy.

It is not the same thing to say, "My

love will win the child over, therefore I can wait." That's loving a potential ally.

What's the state of loving an enemy? Can you imagine any way in which it is not painful?

Imagine, then, what it is going to take to show us God's love for us while we are yet sinners. Paul says it is Christ's death that proclaims that good news.

Earlier in the passage Paul suggests that we can have something to rejoice about in our own sufferings also.

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts.

Our own suffering becomes something to rejoice in when it arises out of God's love pouring into our hearts.

Thy Kingdom Come

Almighty God,

Hear us as we pray for the coming of your kingdom.

We get the feeling that the principalities and powers that reign in the world are not yours. There are too many victims, too much violence, too many hungry and homeless. Human brutality and zealous righteousness overwhelm human charity.

Our cry, O God, for the hastening of your kingdom rises from our fear and terror.

Living God,
your kingdom has drawn near to us countless times. We have known what

it is to be healed by another's stripes. We have been reconciled to enemies by your graces. We have seen the least raised up. We have been blessed by those we at first rejected.

Our cry, O God, for the hastening of your kingdom rises in us because our eyes have glimpsed your kingdom.

Gracious God,
others have opened for us entrance into your kingdom and we hold the keys of the kingdom for others. Our cry unto you, to hasten your kingdom, rises from our concern that we may be shutting people out.

Loving God,
reign in our hearts without a rival;
reign in all the world, so that no one is left out.

Amen

Thursday

***Why trust what can't
make alive?***

Galatians 3: 21-29

A lot of people think that Christianity has a thing about sin. Of course they're right. Some others have tried to get Christianity out from under this characterization. These often blame Paul for turning an optimistic believe-in-the-basic-goodness-of-people "Jesus religion" into a pessimistic people-are-rotten-to-the-core

salvation cult. I think these people are mistaken. A wedge can't be driven between the gospel writers and Paul.

I think people who wish Christianity didn't have a thing about sin have been put off by a distortion of what is meant by sin. I don't think the Christian preoccupation with sin is an arbitrary put-down of all human striving for goodness. It is not a way for a bullying God to browbeat everyone into submission. Rather, it is a helpful insight into a perverse human predicament. To get one's puzzling situation named right is to receive good news, not a put-down.

I remember a very strange discussion that took place at the time of the moon landing. The world stood in wonder at the accomplishment. And some interviewer was stuck on the question, "How could people ever again say that human beings were some kind of lesser breed?" This day was going to mark the end forever of the Christian doctrine of human depravity.

I think the moon landing illustrated the Christian doctrine of sin. Here was a race that could land on the moon, but not live on the earth in peace. That same species which can make unbelievable technical accomplishments cannot seem to prevent its technology from destroying the earth, its home. The human condition is cursed with contradictions. Life is full of situations where you cannot make unharmful choices. Good schemes do harm. Remedies create new problems. Institutions, built to serve us, enslave some. What are we doing being thankful when we benefit but others do not? On the other hand,

what are we doing being ungrateful for the gifts of life? Life cannot be lived without rules, yet rules put us in a position where we cannot keep one without breaking another. Life driven by desire is a disaster; life driven by a bad conscience is a disaster. Human life is caught in a dilemma that defies most cures.

I think Paul's refreshing little sentence makes the telling point:

If a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would have indeed been by the law.

There's that word righteousness, or justification, again.

If we could have been *put right* by a law, then it would have happened! The human condition is in deeper trouble than striving to obey laws can fix. But striving to obey laws can lead you to know you need a better cure. It can put you in a position to hear the goodness of God's remedy for sin.

Confession

Father and Mother of all,
the Bible tells us you have a way with
sin and sinners.

Here we come.

Hear us and see through us.

We come, bearing our most bothersome regrets: the ones closest to the surface that spoil everything else.

Hear us as we name them...

We come bearing our neglects. We have responsibilities for people and tasks that aren't getting attended to.

Hear us as we name them...

We come, bearing the burdens that you did not place with us but that we assumed in pride or in the vain

undertaking of punishing ourselves.

Hear us as we name them...

We come bearing our blindness and the trail of harm we leave that we know not of.

Hear us as we recognize this...

We come bearing our deafness to your word and to the cries of people that sound forth around us.

Give us ears to hear.

We come bearing the evil that our institutions do, the benefits that benefit us at great cost to others.

Hear us as we name these...

We bring our self-righteousness and our zeal to be innocent, which leads us to wash our hands of corporate sin and turn our backs on the troubled world.

Sin-bearer of the world, receive us as we unload all this.

Sin abounds, may grace much more abound!

Amen

Friday

The zeal to be blameless is well lost

Philippians 3: 3-11

Of all the biblical writers, Paul is the one who deals most profoundly with the puzzling connection between righteousness and sin. Throughout his writing we see him putting sin and death and the law in the same class. At the same time he names the law as God's good *gift*! If life didn't have any organizing principles, any code of behaviour for society, any standards or values, humans would live in a state of constant war. If human beings didn't strive for righteousness, their life together would be disastrous.

But the problem is that a world full of people striving after righteousness is also enormously destructive. The world's religious wars have been as brutal as any. Our present conflict between superpowers which threatens to engulf the earth in the most destructive war ever, is a conflict between two righteous-minded solutions to the problem of social organization. In the medical field, the more zeal you have for healing, the more problem you have with letting people die with dignity. The more you seek to be a successful parent, the harder it is for you to free up your children to be their own people. The more zeal you have to be blameless, the less you can undertake responsibility for putting right the evil in the world!

I don't think there is a neat comment that can put the problem of the relationship between sin and righteous-

ness to rest. Paul admits several times that he sounds as if he is contradicting himself. I think it is that kind of problem. Every neat statement we make about it will have something wrong with it.

But one of Paul's most helpful comments on the matter comes in this Philippian letter. I like to call it Paul's own description of his conversion. The conversion we are familiar with is reported several times in the book of Acts. He is on his way to Damascus to seek out and punish the Christian community there when he sees a great light and falls blinded to the ground. There we have a story written *about* Paul. Even if the words are often put in Paul's mouth, it is still in a book *about* him. This passage is from a document *by* him.

First of all, note the unconventional thinking around the word *flesh*. What does he list as examples of his confidence in the flesh?

1. Circumcision, the mark of his belongings to Israel,
2. his qualifying as a pharisee,
3. his zeal for God, so that he persecuted the church,
4. his blamelessness under the law!

Zeal for God, zeal to be blameless, these are confidence in the flesh!

And these are things to be well rid of, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

According to Paul, what he got converted *from* was "a righteousness of my own". That names the culprit. That's the heart of the predicament. That's what puts the world at odds with itself and with God. People with righteousness of their own.

What he gave all that up *for* was righteousness from God, that depends on faith, a putting right that is God's doing, not our accomplishment. It is God who puts the world right with God.

Speak Lord

Almighty God, we beheld your glory, full of grace and truth in the Word made flesh.

We weren't expecting it. We expect you to reach us through something spiritual. We'd kind of given up on the flesh. We'd almost come to see the flesh as an affliction, as something to escape from.

What a breakthrough for the Word to become flesh, and dwell in our midst! We are inclined to think it is not possible.

But if it is possible, there is no better news. How our flesh would benefit from a Word made flesh!

O Holy Spirit, witness with our spirits to the Word made flesh. Point us to those places where we meet your Word made flesh.

Open our eyes to your visitation, our senses to your touch, our ears to your call. Renew our weary flesh, for it is with our bodies that we serve you, and it is in our flesh that we love and serve the world.

Purge our flesh with the glory we behold in the one who was made sin for us.

And keep us in the way everlasting.

Amen

Saturday

What can put the world right?

II Corinthians 5: 17-21

The Corinthian letters are wonderfully revealing of the man Paul and the congregation at Corinth. Read these epistles sometime as though you had come upon some letters written, centuries ago, by a preacher to his congregation. Play amateur historian. Look for evidence with which to reconstruct what was going on at the time. How many letters have passed between them? What is the relationship between this congregation and its leaders? What upsets them about Paul and what upsets Paul about them? The better you know the writer and his context the more living help he will be to you as a theologian. It is real people that are witnesses to God's grace. Idealized saints are a poor substitute.

Today's verses come in the correspondence after several letters have passed between Paul and the church. At least one was a very angry letter from Paul to them. As he thinks about it, he is sorry he wrote it. But he is also not sorry, because it resulted in some godly sorrow which is good for everybody as it works repentance. Today's verses are part of a tender letter. Paul and the congregation are making up after an enormous spat.

It is verses like these that indicate there is no essential divergence between Paul and the Gospel writers. The reason *they* paid so much attention to Passion Week, the reason they spend so many words having

Jesus explain that it was necessary for him to suffer, is that, like Paul, they see the life and death of Christ as God's righteousness at work. When what we see in the life and death of Christ is God putting the world right, everything becomes new. If all we see in Jesus is an example to be followed, we have the same old world.

This crucified one is God's work putting the world right. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. God's righteousness, as distinct from a righteousness of our own, is fulfilled in overcoming the brokenness of the world. God does not count our sins against us. It is forgiveness that reconciles us to God. It is God's forgiveness that accomplishes our new creation. Nothing greater can happen than that we are forgiven. Behold all things are new.

Anyone who has experienced genuine forgiveness will know that such new creation does not come cheaply. When one person has offended another, that offence has not been forgiven when it has been forgotten by both parties. The offence has not been forgiven until they remember it together. They are reconciled when they see the offence between them with each other's eyes. What sight, other than the cross of Christ, can reconcile us to God?

Wonders of wonders, we have this ministry of reconciliation with one another. We are ambassadors for Christ. The way one gets to know that one is forgiven by God is through someone who has been forgiven by God.

Praise

Thank God.

Now and again there is a kind of thanksgiving in us that can get expressed only by thanking you.

The gift of life in the body is a wondrous mystery. Light and sound, thought and feeling, agony and ecstasy. None of it the work of our hands. Indeed it is when we think we create ourselves that we subject the creation to futility.

How transformed life is when we freely receive it as your gift.

Thanks be to God.

The gift that other people are to us in their unique reality is of unsurpassing treasure.

There is no accounting for it, there is no measuring it, there is no earning it, there is only the grateful receiving of it.

Thanks be to God.

Your gift of forgiveness is the greatest thing that can happen to us.

Thereby we are restored to you, and to the others, and to ourselves.

Thereby we receive the gift of life again and can embrace it with thanksgiving.

Thanks be to God.

Your gift of your Spirit empowers our life in you without destroying us, leaving our integrity intact. Your Spirit is the fount of all our blessings. Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Amen

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Any old death won't do

Romans 6: 3-11

Today I propose that we reflect on what it means to be "united with Christ in a death like his." It is a good time to attempt to make some important distinctions. All through this Lenten study we have considered writings that made a connection between the suffering of God's chosen person and our healing. All along there was the inference that there was to be suffering on *our* part in connection with this healing. Paul makes this point many times in his letters. The way we are put right by God as a gift is to die and rise with Christ.

In the Gospels we hear about being born again. We hear about taking up our cross in order to follow Christ. We hear about drinking the cup that he drank and being baptized with the baptism with which he was baptized. Whatever God's remedy for sin, it is not a transaction that takes place in some far off world. It is a relationship in which we are full participants.

But this does not mean that every kind of suffering is good for me, or every kind of miserable fate is God's will for me. Nor does it mean that every way in which I bring suffering down on myself contributes to my salvation. Not any old kind of death accompanies our reconciliation with God. As Paul says, it is to be a death like Christ's.

If I am to let God put things right as a

gift, I must forgo all attempts at self-justification. If God's righteousness is to prevail with me, I must forgo a righteousness of my own. If God's forgiveness is to reconcile us, I must come before God empty-handed. That's the kind of dying that's good for me and for the world.

If I am to participate in the ministry of reconciliation, so that people discover through me that they are forgiven by God, then I must have risked leaving my justification up to God. Boasting and defensiveness are excluded.

If God's remedy for sin is to bear it, then I will find that my reconciliation with God has put me bearing the sin of others. It is one thing to accommodate a beloved friend or a gracious guest. It is another thing to put up with a tiresome neighbour. But it is an entirely different matter to bear the sin of another. That's what it is to participate in Christ's suffering.

This business of bearing sinners is not put forward as punishment. It is not put forward as pain to be endured in order to win a reward. It is put forward as *what it is like* to be reconciled to God; as *what it is like* to be in Christ; as *what it is like* to be a new creation.

No wonder we shake our heads over the gospel.

If I could learn to love like that, it *would* make everything new.

Benediction

Eternal God ruler of history,
Long ago, at Mispah, your not so
worthy servants covenanted together:

"May the Lord watch between me and you while we are absent one from another."

O Bountiful One, may the blessing of that benediction visit the earth in countless places.

Watch between the strong and the weak so that the mighty don't get to have everything their way.

Watch between the have's and the have-not's so that the affluent don't get to have everything.

Watch between those powers who trust in their own righteousness lest they offer up everyone else.

Watch between the nations which trust in their own might for their safety, lest they destroy the earth.

Watch between all the interests of the world who trust that competition for survival is the law of life, lest they devour the resources of the earth in their competition.

Dear God, if we could all let it be your watching alone that is between us,

your benediction would visit the earth in countless places.

Watch between us, O God, for if we take care of what is between us without you, we will destroy us all.

Amen

Monday

Finally, someone says it

I John 4: 7-21

In this last week of Lent before Holy Week our readings come from the epistles that are left, after we exclude those everyone agrees Paul wrote. But I did not intend this to be a meaningful classification. After dividing the weeks of Lent between a number of biblical writers, I had a week left over and these writers left over. They are all significant writers, but there is no significance to my lumping them together.

In this First Epistle of John, a Christian writer finally says it. *God is love*. What else were those exilic prophets working around to? What was more central to John's Gospel with his lines "God so loved the world" and "By this you shall be known as my disciples, if you love one another"? What else inspired the writer of all those angry and boastful words to the Corinthians to write also chapter 13 of the first epistle? It is what all the preaching and teaching is about. It is what all the stories are about, all the words like righteousness, justification, reconciliation, dying and rising. It is what the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are about. It is what the gift of the Holy Spirit is all about. And now someone finally says it. *God is love*.

Again, I want to share how ironical I find it that the occasion of the revelation "God is love" is revealed in the death of one who suffered unjustly!

In this the love of God was mani-

fest among us in that God sent his son into the world so that we might live through him.

Yet what else could be the window through which we see God's love?

If God is love, then all the glory and majesty and might and power of God must be standing against unlove. Yet, if God is love, then all that is unloving must be within God's embrace. How can anything be that much against, and that much for, the same thing at the same time? The Bible is not talking about mush when it says "God is love". It is talking about something fierce and tender at the same time. That total a love must be doing something like bearing its own wrath. That's why you get to behold it only in a crucified one.

The Gospel is all in that sentence, "God is love." It's another way of telling the radical good news.

What else lights up life? What else makes travail exalting? What else blesses grief? What else can turn the burden of sin-bearing into an easy yoke? Most of us have had an experience of love making all thing new.

But we also have abundant experience of the pain of love turning us off and the wounds of love hardening our hearts. We have used love to manipulate others and have been manipulated by others in the name of love. That is to say, if love was just a new requirement that promised to make us alive, we would be of all creatures most miserable. If what was to put us right was the law of love, then we have been given more bad news. However,

In this is love, not that we loved

God, but that God loved us.
It is because God loves *us* that the
splendour of love is good news.

Praise

Almighty God,
It is good to have all the majesty and
power and dominion and praise
where it belongs.

No end of trouble is ours when we
dread the wrong things, when we
hold in honour that which is not
worthy.

No end of disasters follow when we
tremble before powers that cannot
harm us.

All fails us when we trust that which
cannot save us.

All honour and praise, O God, are
for you alone.

Only your reconciling righteousness
has just claim to our zeal.

Only a steadfast love of the world is
fit ruler for the human heart.

Only the light that lightens everyone
is fit light of the world.

No glory is more glorious than the
love that bears sinners.

Worthy is the lamb who was slain to
receive power and wealth, wisdom
and might and honour and glory and
blessing.

Amen

Tuesday

It's flesh that saves us

Colossians 1: 15-26

It is very possible Paul wrote this letter. The ideas are similar to his, as are the concerns addressed and the metaphors used to express the significance of Jesus Christ. Unlike the letters which are indisputably his, this one has a more general sound. It has not been dashed off in spontaneous response to a particular situation. The language is beginning to sound conventional rather than newly minted in order to express a new mystery. Therefore, whether by Paul or not, what we have here are the beginnings of the expression of the *community's* faith. This is less the language of one person's pilgrimage and more the conventional formulation of correct belief. The passage for today reads, in part, like an official creed.

All the more interesting for its content. As the reading begins it mentions something very much like the Word made flesh. This is followed by a flowery statement that if you want to know what the power and majesty of God is all about, it is in Christ that they all dwell. Christ is declared the head of the church, the body of Christ. God's work in Christ is declared to be the reconciliation of all things on earth and in heaven. It is through the blood of Christ's cross that this reconciliation is accomplished. It reads like a list of topics for our reflection through Lent.

We have good reason to feel, sometimes, that orthodoxy and conven-

tional expressions lose the sharp edge and radical depth of the original insights they were meant to safeguard. In the experience of any of us pious words can get so familiar that they pass by without taking any effect. How often have you heard someone say, when they finally hear the gospel, "Why didn't someone tell me that's what it was about?"

I think it is worth noting, from time to time, that the words are there, asleep in the conventional language. And the conventional language can become a great gift once the words are made alive.

Notice how the conventional language of our text continues to use that no-no word *flesh* in connection with our salvation:

And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of *flesh* by his death.

I think the connection those first Christians made between Christ's flesh and our reconciliation with God will remain a living source of insights until the end of time.

And that source becomes even more abundant when we read down to the verse where the author characterizes his own role in the ministry of reconciliation, as resting in *his* flesh.

Who of us has not grown flesh-weary and flesh-disgusted for long periods and to great depths. What a promise, that we can have redemptive purpose restored to our flesh!

Offering

God of the ages,
your people Israel brought you many
and diverse offerings.

They brought thank offerings
sin offerings
wave offerings and
heave offerings.

We can understand why they called one of them "heave offering" — having to do with the shoulder, lifting up by putting one's shoulder to it.

Almighty God, we bring you our
heave offering:

The burdens that have been too much for us. The ones we take up in pride and self-righteousness; the ones we punish ourselves with in guilt and self-rejection. The ones we are right-fully under because that's where you are.

Almighty God, we bring to you our
heave offering:

All our responsibilities: the people and causes that count on us; the people and causes that absorb us; the people and causes we neglect. Gracious God, we are nothing if we are not responsible, and we lift up our responsibilities that you might receive, cleanse and bless them.

Almighty God, we bring you our
heave offering:

The offering that we can only make together: the work and the ministry and mission that we can do only if we band together. How prone we are to strive and suffer alone when you have given us to one another.

We lift up one another and our collective efforts so that our service can be received and cleansed and blessed.

Receive, O God, everything that is on our backs. Make room there for Christ's easy yoke and his light burden. Amen

Wednesday

God and anger

Ephesians 3: 14-19; 4: 25-32

Ephesians reads more like an essay than a letter. It is written without haste in the cool of the day. The author savours his long, balanced sentences. Things are being recollected in tranquillity rather than thought out on the spot. By this time a great deal of thinking has been done in the church, many connections made. Many things have been put in place. Indeed it feels as if nothing is out of place. The Christian movement is beginning to have an established language. It has the sound of a familiar faith rather than a puzzling innovation.

I find it significant that, as the Christian movement lost its youth, its message didn't lose its edge.

Through much of my ministry I would read those verses from chapter three as part of the marriage ceremony. I used the author's prayer as a kind of toast to the bride and groom—that they being rooted and grounded in love would come to comprehend the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ and so be filled with all the fullness of God. Familiar as it is, and one long flowing sentence as it is, it manages to sing out the gospel every time.

I picked the second passage from this letter because there is a line in it that indicates that the original good news has not lost its edge.

Be angry, but do not sin.

If we could spell out exactly what that means for all time it wouldn't be any good as the vehicle of a living word to us when we needed it. But it is a sentence that is worth walking around while it gives off hints as to its meaning.

One can be angry and not sin. Anger isn't necessarily a sin. Anger can be an appropriate state. As the body of believers builds itself up in love, anger has a place. The author speaks of our growing up in Christ by speaking the truth in love to one another. A loving fellowship is not to be equated with one from which all anger has been removed. The revelation "God is love" does not eliminate God's wrath. Rather it puts before us a loving wrath.

True as all that is, and solid good news as it can be, it runs the risk of demonic distortion. The closer we come to the essence of the gospel, the greater the peril that we turn it into a righteousness of our own. The notion of God's loving wrath is much closer to the gospel than the sweet mush often put in its place. But the notion that wrath can be loving has been used, down the ages, to give humans holy title to do vicious things to one another.

Anger isn't necessarily sinful, but it usually is. It is probably right that we not trust our powers to make the distinction. As the author of Ephesians has it,

Let not the sun go down on your anger.

Confession

Here we are, see us, O God.

See our struggle to *be*:

Our procedures for holding life together, our devices for proving we're somebody, our defences of our status and territory. We lay all that before you. It has often felt perverse and futile. As we bring it for you to see, we discover how destructive it has been and how mistaken.

Have mercy upon us.

See our effort to be good:

Our caring and our serving. As we lay our goodness before you, we discover it falls short. Our hearts harden when caring gets painful; and our aggressive help is destructive. Our goodness fails to save a lost world, and our highest goodness is too often what shuts you out.

Have mercy upon us.

See our life with you:

There is the heart of the matter. We lay before you all that we trust to save us. All that we cry about when we feel unjustly done by. All that we complain about when we feel abandoned by you. We lay before you our troubled search for you as we flee the world you love and punish the flesh you became.

Nothing greater can happen to us than that we are forgiven.

Amen

Thursday

God's penetrating Word

Hebrews 4: 1-16

The next three readings are from the Epistle to the Hebrews. Here is a writer for whom making connections with the past is of great importance. The pattern for the saving work of Christ is all there in the story of Israel. The way God dealt with Israel is a fore-taste of how God deals with us through Christ. The old-timers are held up sometimes as a "cloud of witnesses" and sometimes as bad examples. The faith of Israel is held in solemn awe at the same time that the claim is made that our hero is better than your hero.

I can understand why the book of Hebrews has become an embarrassment to those present-day Christians who have begun to hear what we sound like to the Jews.

I also find that the author's proof-texts are not much help to me in putting my doubts to rest or overcoming my backsliding. But in the midst of all the stuff that leaves me cold or puts me off, I constantly come upon explosions of insight. I am not always moved by the *arguments*, yet I find myself addressed by God in this writing.

This is the writer who observes, almost as an aside, in chapter nine, verse 22, that the way Israel does it, "...almost everything is purified with blood. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." What do you think of that? It might just be

the case. Any of us who have come upon anything that really needed forgiving can see how it would take something like that.

This is the writer who quotes a line from Haggai, which had another meaning altogether when it was first used:

Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.

To this author, our earth-shaking experiences have the purpose of removing what is perishable so that what is imperishable can remain.

This is the author who penned the lines.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

I find that most eloquent language, distinguishing a genuine God-experience from a spurious one: a time of penetrating insight, a time when the inner person is fully known. It seems to me that what helps this language reach its depth is its use of both spiritual and fleshy words:

...piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow.

Finally, the closing verses of our reading contain God-language that has long worked for me, and still does, even if the masculine pronoun grates on my new awareness:

And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

How different that language is from

much of our talk about God. God is the one with whom we "have to do", whether we know it or not, whether we hold proper views of God or not, whether we feel God-forsaken or not, or whether we think the notion of God is nonsense or not. Life has to do with whatever life has to do with.

I find this word quieting to my feverish search for God. It says to me, "Open your eyes to the one with whom you are having to do." When life runs into something it must deal with—that's where to look for God.

Thy Kingdom Come

Eternal God, your kingdom is like a seed that has been planted in the ground.

Nourish that seed. Hasten its growth, and give us eyes to see where it flourishes even now.

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a perennial stream.

Lift up the fallen; comfort the afflicted; deliver the oppressed; restore the violated; reconcile the estranged.

Give us eyes to see the servants of your reign that go unrecognized in our midst.

Bring peace on earth; cause warfare to cease; evaporate our trust in armaments; remove our need to strive with one another for mastery.

Give us eyes to recognize peace-making when we see it.

Fill the hungry with good things and hasten the time when no one is sent

empty away, no one forgotten or excluded.

Give us eyes to recognize those who are even now living and serving as if your reign were at hand.

Reign in our hearts so that we can care for the world; so that we can be instrumental in hastening your kingdom.

Amen

Friday

Joy in the cross

Hebrews 12: 1-13

I picked this passage because it is, again, a working out of the redemptive connection between God and suffering. Here is another version of how the cross of Christ is good news.

In Jesus' endurance of sinners' hostility we have an inexhaustible source of courage for our own battle against sin, especially when we remember (as the author points out in chapter four, verse 15 of the letter) that in Jesus we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weakness, having been tempted as we are.

In some verses from Proverbs the writer finds a clue to the meaning of some of the stuff we have to endure:

My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his

reproof. For the Lord reproves him whom he loves as a father the son in whom he delights.

Some of the painful stuff our lives have to endure is there because the one with whom we "have to do" is treating us like sons and daughters, like children of God. While this, like all discipline, will be painful, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. That pain is good news. Something real is going on between us and God which is for our good. We get to share God's holiness.

Obviously this is one of the arguments in Hebrews that doesn't put me off. With its quote from Proverbs it gets to me with a word.

But this passage contains a couple of hidden treasures along with the main theme and these were additional reasons for selecting it for our reflection. Both are occasions where the word broke through in off-hand remarks.

The first of these is a remark in verse 13:

And make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

For someone who spends half a letter laying down warnings of total punishment for backsliders, I find this a most winning addition. The footnotes suggest that this may be partially quoted from Proverbs. But there is no mention of care for the lame in Proverbs.

I am glad that we are called to order our lives together so that the lame are not put out of joint. Lame Christians of the world, rejoice! Someone is thinking of you.

The other occasion comes in the midst of that great burst of conventional language.

Looking to Jesus...*who for the joy that was set before him* endured the cross, despising the shame.

Given the setting in the story of Israel, given the whole evangelistic witness, this aside can't be made to mean simply, "It was all worth it for him because he ended up at the right hand of God." Rather its full intention includes the suggestion that there was joy in his accepting the cross, because it was the work of God's right hand.

Petition

Loving God,
We interrupt our business and quiet the clamour of our desiring, to listen for the sound of crying.

We wait for the cries that go up from our planet Earth to reach us so that we can lift those cries to you.

Who can count the people of the earth who cry for bread? We lift up the cries of the hungry; send them not away empty.

Who can number the refugees of the earth? We lift up the cries of the homeless, that host of souls who have been told, "You have no place that's yours." Let them not be forgotten.

Hear the cries of the countless of the earth whose lives are held cheap, who are daily expended because they get in the way of some tyrant or some power struggle. Let them be counted.

Hear the cries of the burdened, who dread the living of their lives. Teach

them your easy yoke and your uplifting burden.

Hear the sick, with their cries of fear and pain. Hear the soundless cries of the lonely. Hear the sighs of the weary.

Hear the grim gnashing of teeth of all those who strive in vain to please you, who know not the gospel, and especially those who resist the gospel.

Dear God, where the gospel sheds not its glorious ray, let there be light.

Amen

Saturday

Holy contamination

Hebrews 13: 8-16

Here is another passage by this author where I miss the argument but get hit by the word. Someone has been leading the early church astray by insisting on what sounds like dietary practices. We are told that it is more important that we be strengthened by grace than by foods which brought no real benefit to anyone. But the next two sentences explode with penetrating insight into the depth of the gospel:

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside

the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.

A footnote points to a reference in Leviticus. There, we are instructed, not only must the sin offerings be burned outside the camp, but also that the person in charge of this burning must be cleansed of contamination before returning to the camp.

Clearly the inference in Leviticus is that the holiness of God must not be contaminated by sin!

Just as clearly, the inference in Hebrews is that Christ, the holy one of God, has taken this contamination upon himself. How better to put the scandal of the gospel?

Where is God in this wrong-headed world? Look under the burden of the world's sin. And as you and I become God-filled people, that's where we are, outside the gate, where the people of the world sin and suffer.

Credit for the following paragraph belongs to Roman Catholic Sister Mary Jagen of New York. It first appeared about 10 years ago in an inter-church publication to promote concern for economic justice in the third world. It became part of the language of the justice and peace movement:

It does not matter that we may be personally innocent of acts we perceive to be unjust, our institutions do our sinning for us.

Some of the evil in the world is there because bad people do bad things. But a more persistent and tragic kind of evil in the world is the kind our institutions do for us. Especially the

good institutions: like the marketplace, like our political institutions, like the judicial system, like the health care system, like the welfare system, like collective bargaining. The operation of all these systems includes the doing of injustices.

Can you imagine a holy cure for that? Scold the wicked? Warn the sinner? Act as the conscience of the state? Make sure you and yours are clean? Withdraw from the world in order to establish an exemplary community? By themselves, all of these "cures" *avoid* taking responsibility for the sinning our institutions do for us.

What this "outside the camp" aside is telling us is that we will find God when we get *under* the load of the world's sin.

There is one more surprise for me in this passage. The writer says that the reason we can join Jesus outside the gate, bearing abuse for him, is that we have no continuing city here but seek a city that is to come.

According to this author, the purpose of the dynamic pull of the heavenly city is to empower us to join Christ, outside the camp, under the world's sin. The effect of having our true home in heaven is that we can truly love the world.

Benediction

Almighty, ever blessed God, lover of the world.

We come to ask your blessing on those we bring before you.

Here are the children. How vulnerable they are to the aggression of

those who have the care of them.
How dependent they are on others.
What wounds they can receive from
the rest of us.

O God, bless the children of the
earth.

Here are the downtrodden, victims of
the clash of cultures, their inheritance
lost as they are overwhelmed by more
militant peoples.

O God, bless the threatened peoples
of the earth.

Here are the poor, the host of people,
young and old, who never have
enough, and who seem doomed to be
without, while others have in abun-
dance.

O God, bless the poor of the earth.
Here are the forgotten, the unnoticed,
the unheard from. All the hidden
benefactors, the unheeded peace-
makers, the unknown failures, the
unrecognized faithful.

Pass these not by, O gentle Saviour.

Hear their humble cries.

And let the music they make be
heard by the rest of us.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Palm/Passion Sunday

Once nobody, now somebody

I Peter 2: 4-10

First Peter is another early Christian writing that is more tract than letter, concerned with the dangers and problems confronting the whole church and presenting a message of general relevance. It is written in main-line, official, religious language which nonetheless retains the fresh, living quality of the language of discovery.

It seems the main problem the letter deals with is the persecution that is being experienced generally throughout the church. It is interesting to note how hard and often the writer undertakes to make the distinction between harassment that comes from trouble-making and harassment that comes from faithfulness to Christ. In the midst of three or four attempts to address the problem, he uses metaphors that flash deep gospel insights like the facets of a jewel.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people.

Once you were nobody, now you are somebody.

I had an interview once with a bright 15-year-old boy who had been placed in a juvenile containment institution under an indefinite sentence. The

young man confessed to an interest in history, which subject he was taking by correspondence. Surprised, I asked him why he was interested in history. He told me about his desire to reach back and put his finger on how things came to be. Becoming even more interested, I expressed a wish that he would have a chance to work on this quest face to face with a teacher, instead of in a correspondence course.

He replied, "Teachers! I can't stand teachers. I can't stand anyone in authority. I can't stand parents, that's why I'm here. I've been declared incorrigible. That's why my sentence is still indefinite. Whenever I have anything to do with anyone up there I have to figure out some way to put them down."

What a powerful attempt to move from being nobody to being somebody! And with what disastrous results. The boy's vigorous attempts to prove he was somebody turned everyone into his enemy.

First Peter is talking about a more excellent way.

You get to be somebody because God calls you somebody.

Once you were no people, now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, now you have received mercy.

You get to be somebody because God forgives you.

How deep within human beings is the need to justify our existence, to prove we are somebody. How great the futility and devastation that accompanies all our attempts at self-justification. How complete the surrender for us to let it be God who justifies.

No wonder the early Christians got to use the metaphor of a rejected stone and a stumbling stone becoming the headstone of the corner.

I so like our author's little aside in chapter one, verse 12. This is the kind of news "into which the angels long to look."

Speak Lord

Living God,
Your word is a lamp unto our feet.
Penetrate our darkness with your
great light.

We stumble around in our darkness;
we fail to do the good we set out to do;
we do a lot of harm we try not to do.
Our good undertakings do damage;
the world's darkness terrifies us;
our consciences make us afraid.

Penetrate our darkness.

We stumble over you in the darkness.
Somewhere underfoot is our
salvation.

We need the light of your word to
recognize it.

We run here and there by the light
that we and ours see by.

Reach us with the light that is for
everyone.

No one lights a lamp unless they have
in mind illuminating someone or
something.

Keep your light before us where it
can penetrate our dull sight.

Through Jesus our Lord.

Amen

Monday of Holy Week

Unfinished business

Romans 8: 22-39

For Holy Week I have selected scripture readings which make clear reference to the *unfinished* nature of our life in Christ as the New Testament portrays it. I was a young adult when that came clear to me for the first time. I had undergone several serious commitments to Christ, each time thinking there must have been something wrong with the former one and resolving that this time it would be for real. I heard the Bible teaching me that it was futile to keep trying to be good. Rather, I was to give myself to God and then my life would be victorious and abundant—like the Apostle Paul's. I was starting to believe that the promised experience was not for real.

I can almost name the month, day, and year when those words from Romans 8 first came through to me. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." Remember it is after his conversion and after many years of dedicated ministry that Paul says this. Sighs too deep for words, because we don't know how to pray, are the mark of a spirit-filled Christian.

Throughout the New Testament, the new creation we have in Christ Jesus

is seen as an earnest, a down payment, a first harvest, a seeing through a glass darkly. What keeps us going is not that we have arrived, but that he who has begun a good work in us is capable of finishing it.

The eighth chapter of Romans holds a special place in my formation. It opened a whole new way for the New Testament word to address me in my reality. It led me to the discovery that what I was experiencing placed me in excellent company.

At any one time, you and I are far from believing the gospel in its depth. I want to get out from under the world's sin. I am not looking to find God there. We don't have much of a hold on such a God. But what counts is God's hold on us.

Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

(Ephesians 5: 25b-27a)

Confession

Gracious God

We have trouble making a good confession,

Hear our sighs, too deep for words, and empower us to come before you:

With our actions, those called for and those made in righteous haste;
With our postponements, those acts put off because of fearfulness and those put off because of a tender heart;

With our bad conscience, that which
arises from your word

and that which arises from the
punishment we inflict on ourselves
to avoid your word;

With our good conscience—lest our
zeal to be blameless

blind us to our culpability;

With our hurting, that which comes
from love of the world,

and that which comes from self-
pity;

With our bravado, that which rests
on faith in you

and that which comes from a hard-
ened heart;

With our failures, those due to sloth
and those which come from under-
taking what is called for.

God, we bring *us*,
and the matters of this day, and
every day.

Have mercy upon us.

Straighten us out.

Grant us your peace.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Tuesday of Holy Week

Viewers of the promise from afar

Hebrews 11: 8-16

The letter to the Hebrews is a 13-chapter tract addressing the problem of apostasy. The epistle is concerned about people who start out strong believers and then fall away. The writer swings back and forth from warning the readers of what a dreadful fate will befall them if they renounce so wondrous a salvation as is theirs, to encouraging them with how profound is God's love of even the most blatant sinner.

His swinging discourse is riddled throughout with some of the most penetrating insights into what is good about the good news.

Admittedly, in the verses suggested for today, he is talking about Abraham and Sarah and their immediate relatives, not his fellow Christians. It is also true that this author is continually pointing out how much better the new promise is than the old, the new priesthood than the old. But he cannot always keep his distinctions clear. And he does commend the behaviour he finds in Abraham and Sarah. Throughout his tract he maintains his own form of the "already and not yet" character of life under the new covenant. Christians also have no lasting city here but seek a city that is to come.

It is a safe and just procedure therefore to hear a word for our lives in

this description of those early so-journers, Abraham and Sarah.

First of all, they obeyed when they were called to go to a place they were to receive as an inheritance. Not knowing where they were to go, they nevertheless set out. But they didn't receive the inheritance. They so-journed in the land that was their inheritance as in a *foreign* land, living in tents.

Let that metaphor do its own work for a while before reading on. Is that what a Christian's life in the world is like?

Remember this is the author who invites us to go outside the gate with the contaminated animals of the sin offering—because that is where Christ is (13: 11-13). What enables people to join God's chosen one under the burden of the world's sin? It is that they long for a city that is to come.

Back to these old-timers. "They did not receive what was promised but they saw it and greeted it from afar. People like that are seekers after a homeland. If they'd been thinking of the land from which they came...they could have availed themselves of many opportunities to return. But they desired a better country...that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God."

Is that how it is with us?

Thy Kingdom Come

God, the world is out of joint.

Your good gifts are not being justly shared, nor is your bounty being

properly husbanded. All of us, in our land of plenty, have a part in this deprivation and waste.

You made us for each other. Male and female you made us. You made us members of one another.

But we are alienated from one another and divided against one another: man against woman, east against west, haves against have-nots, powerful against powerless. Peoples and nations are imagining vain things all over the place. Armies clash in religious zeal. Clouds of an ultimate conflict darken the earth.

Hear us as we pray for the coming of your kingdom. Where power is held, enlighten and temper it. Where power is lacking, strengthen those without it. Sustain the hands of the people who intercede on behalf of the needy. Have mercy on your saints who battle the hosts of hell. Uphold those who pay the price of wresting change from the reluctant. Cheer the warriors for justice.

Give us all eyes to see your glory even now, the glory we behold in the face of Jesus Christ, the glory of the Lamb who bears the sin of the world.

Amen

Wednesday of Holy Week

Treasures in clay pots

II Corinthians 4: 1-11

What a relief to find our Christian salvation described in ways that are identifiable, now and again, with our experience. Who is not drawn by the Gospel and at the same time frightened by it? The news is good that the "God who said 'Let light shine out of darkness' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ." It is good news that the crucified one is a window through which we behold the one we wrestle with in the dark of existence. It's good news that God is love. The prospect also frightens us.

I remember once reflecting with an alcoholic on the meaning of the gospel. Her alcoholism had contributed to the breakup of her marriage. Her husband's religion did not permit him to divorce her. She longed for a home and family, but was not permitted to have them. We recalled that the Bible says "God is love" and that this meant that as long as there was loving to do her life could be full and overflowing, no matter what else it was missing. At this point the woman said, "Jack, when I am on the verge of believing that, I panic."

Drawn as we are to the gospel, we don't ever quite trust it. We don't believe it totally. As the gospel appears in our lives it is fragmented.

It is good to see it described that way in the Bible.

In today's reading from second Corinthians, Paul not only reminds us that we have this treasure in earthen vessels but also assures us that it is for a good reason: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels so that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us."

A mighty contribution to our present human predicament is the rush by humans to save the world, each of us with a righteousness of our own. Frightful harm is done to people daily in the name of love. The most horrendous things can be done by humans in the name of God's love. If we are not constrained by the fact that we are earthen vessels of the gospel we can be of enormous harm to others. We also cut *them* off from the power of God. If we assume that we can be unbroken manifestations of the gospel we usurp God's place. What lets us be windows to God's own love, instead of simply our own, is that we don't call attention to ourselves. Or even if we lean on *each other's* love and forgiveness, we lean on a broken reed. We are setting each other up for a betrayal.

We have the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels. It's a good thing, too.

Offering

Receive, O Sovereign One, our offering.

We bring before you what we treasure. We lift up into the light of your countenance all that is precious to us.

We wave before you all that we spend our lives on.

Receive, O God, the offering of our lives broken as they are.

Our zeal to be blameless is more precious to us than the coming of your kingdom, our innocence, than your love of the world. We cling to our good works and our bad consciences as if *they* could save us.

If we really offered these up, could you use them in the salvation of the world? If we truly let go of our treasures, could you use them to bless the world?

Work an acceptable offering in us.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Thursday of Holy Week

Don't pull those weeds

Matthew 13: 24-30

According to Matthew and Luke, much of Jesus' teaching consisted of parables about the kingdom of God. "Kingdom" language is one of the modes in which the early church came to understand and express the saving significance of Jesus Christ. All together, this kingdom language strongly reinforces the double thrust of "already and not yet". Today, the kingdom is fulfilled. God's reign has

broken in. The kingdom is in your midst. Yet the kingdom is about to come. The king is absent and due to return at any minute, like a thief in the night, like a sudden flash of lightning.

The parable selected for today's reading points to the "not yet" dimension of the kingdom. Until the final coming of the kingdom, the wheat and the weeds are not to be separated.

There is always the chance that we will make a parable say what we want to hear, but I find the inescapable point of the parable to be some kind of statement about withholding final judgement until the end.

This is indeed consistent with emphasizing the distinction between God's righteousness and a righteousness of our own. If God's righteousness is such that it is not fulfilled until all the world is reconciled (as seemed to be the point of the parable of the Waiting Father), then we cannot always know beforehand what is right. To bring a preconceived notion of what's right to a situation could prevent what's truly right from taking place.

Withholding final judgement until the end is also consistent with the declared remedy for sin. It is as we come to appreciate the insight of the biblical doctrine of sin that we understand the efficacy of the declared remedy to our sin. As the Bible sees our human predicament, evil is not a behaviour or attitude, easily distinguishable from good, that can be eradicated by a remedy like surgery. It is seen as a fault, a flaw, contaminating the upright and good. The Bible sees the call to be upright as a proper

call, but painfully confused with evil. Sin and the law are opposed and at the same time somehow allies.

This doctrine of sin is not meant to be bad news, browbeating well meaning folk into a sense of their worthlessness. It is offered as a breakthrough insight to explain what has been crossing us up all along, to explain why so many of our cures have not been working.

God's remedy for sin is not to drown it in a flood, not to burn it in a fire, but to bear it on a cross.

One of the consequences of that good news is that we are relieved of the burden of passing final judgement.

Petition

Dear God, we want a word with you, even though we sense everyone else wants a word with you, even though we wonder how anything can come of everyone having a word with you.

But that's how it is with us. Our lives get to the place where the only thing for it is a word with you. The world around us gets so out of order that the only thing for it is a word with you.

There are concerns on our hearts that we seem to be able to do little about. We lift them up to you.

We have loved ones on our hearts and we cannot always have our own way with them. We bring them before you and place them in your care.

What is all this compared to the numberless people throughout the world who are homeless and hungry,

whose countries are devastated by war and famine, whose futures are cut off by the rivalries of mighty empires? We remember these before you...indeed it is when we are before *you* that we remember them.

Dear God, the poor and the hungry, the sick and the lonely, the dispossessed and the downtrodden, the powerless and the oppressed are not all far away in romantic places. They are nearby, among our neighbours. Hear their cry and let their prayers come unto you. We lift their prayers unto you.

Indeed, how can we have our word with you unless all the others do, too?

Amen

Good Friday

***A wonderful reason
for not being saved***

Romans 11: 25-36

The Epistle to the Romans is thought to be Paul's considered introduction of himself to the Christians at Rome, in the hope that they would receive him and think him a worthy missionary to be sent on to Spain. Certainly it is more reflective than his other epistles, which tend to be more reactive, addressing particular concerns rather

than putting forth general theology. Romans is also one of Paul's later letters. It has been called "The Gospel according to Paul".

The verses selected for today's reading come from that part of the epistle which deals with a matter of deep personal sadness to Paul (chapters 9-11). The majority of the Jews have not accepted Christ. Some students of the apostle have suggested that this is the matter Paul has in mind when, in chapter eight, he writes about groaning with sighs too deep for words.

One should work through chapters nine, 10, and 11 in order to hear what God is saying to this wrestler. Paul is indeed wrestling. In these chapters he is not so much sharing his composed thought as he is thinking out loud. We watch him putting his thoughts together. He gets on both sides of the argument. He keeps recalling scripture passages, some of which he seems to find a help, others he lets drop.

Early in chapter nine he quotes some lines that should settle the matter:

I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and

I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

But it doesn't. A few verses on he quotes a statement that should stop the argument:

Who are you to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me thus?"

And the argument continues for 69 more verses.

Paul cannot let the matter rest until he connects the "hardening of Israel" with the conversion of the gentiles. He finally makes his peace upon stating the profound mystery "For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all." He then launches into one of the most eloquent doxologies of the entire Bible.

His praise includes an act of surrender before the mystery of God, "Who can comprehend God's ways?" But it seems to me that this is a very different mystery from the one stated in chapter nine: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy."

In the latter passage God seems to be saying, "None are saved until all are saved." If that is what the brokenness of my salvation is all about, I too can sing Paul's doxology.

Praise

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

"For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?"

"Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory for ever.

Amen

(Romans 11: 34-36)

Holy Saturday

What to do till Jesus comes

I Corinthians 11: 17-26

I am sure you recognized verses 23 to 26 of today's reading as something you have heard repeated in the service of Holy Communion. Throughout its history the service was concerned to keep its liturgy biblically based. Paul's summary in the Corinthian letter of what the Lord's Supper was all about has been used in the basic order of the Christian celebration of the Supper from the earliest time. It is interesting to note that Paul included this summary because he disapproved of the way in which the congregation at Corinth behaved at the Supper.

This re-celebrating of the Lord's Supper—Holy Communion—the Eucharist—began and remains the distinctive act of worship of Christians. With regard to this act there soon grew up a doctrine of the "real presence" of Christ. This was part of the understanding the church grew to have of itself. No one came to faith in Christ in isolation. The trust that God was in Christ reconciling the world to God was mediated from one believer to another. And the ministry of reconciliation was entrusted to the community of believers. It is through the earthen vessel of other believers that the glory of God confronts me in the face of Jesus Christ.

Typical of many of the church's central dogmas, this doctrine of the real

presence became as much an occasion of dispute as of unity. Christians quarrelled over what it meant. Was Christ present in the physical elements or in the community? How was Christ present in the bread and wine? The dispute included the matter of identifying the mediators of the real presence: Who were Christ's true priests? These were not light quarrels and they left the church painfully and tragically divided.

But whatever is at issue in these disputes, all Christians hold to some doctrine of the church as the community that embodies the faith and to a doctrine of the real presence in Holy Communion.

How consistent with our "earthen vessel" understanding of the church's ministry to find that the very words which the church came to use to institute her sacrament of Christ's real presence were first penned on account of one congregation's misbehaviour!

Further study of Paul's summary is even more revealing. In verse 21 he says:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show the Lord's death until he comes.

Right at the heart of the celebration of Christ's real presence, we place the words "till he comes"! Christ is both truly present and about to come again. Does this sound something like the state of Abraham, Sarah and family who "saw the promise and greeted it from afar"?

And that same verse 26 has more for us. How do you celebrate Christ's

real presence? You proclaim his death, or as the Elizabethans translate it, "You show the Lord's death till he come." The way we present the real Christ alive and present with saving power in our midst is a penetrating understanding of his death.

Benediction

Now may the God of peace
who brought again from the dead
our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd
of the sheep,
through the blood of the everlasting
covenant,
make us perfect in every good
work to do his will,
working in us that which is well
pleasing in his sight;
Through Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory for ever and ever.

Amen

(Hebrews 13: 20-21)

Easter Day

***This is the Lord's doing
and wondrous in our eyes***

Acts 2: 14-24

Today's reading is taken from the report in Acts of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost when the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples made its spectacular impact. According to the book of Acts, this kind of preaching was typical of the early church. There is a review of God's saving activity with Israel and the identification of Jesus, the crucified one, as God's definitive saving act.

"This Jesus whom you crucified, God raised up."

If we search the New Testament to discover what the resurrection was like, we are left confused. At one time it is "Don't touch me." At another "Touch me." Jesus passes through closed doors, yet he eats solid food. He can be present for long periods without being recognized. At even the most convincing appearances, it is reported that some doubted.

However, the New Testament is eloquent and consistent in reporting how the first Christians saw the meaning of the resurrection.

This Jesus whom you crucified,
God raised up.

Jesus, whom the disciples failed to understand, God called "my Beloved Son."

Jesus, who was denied, betrayed

and forsaken by his closest friends,
God raised up.

The One who, according to his followers, failed to deliver Israel,
God raised up.

The stone the builders rejected has become the headstone of the corner. This is the Lord's doing and wondrous in our eyes.

Nobody but God could have come up with such a one as this Christ.

Think of the many reasons why he was seen as the king nobody wanted: He befriended publicans and sinners. He announced the gift of God's forgiveness. He appeared as a threat to entrenched righteousness. He saved others, he couldn't save himself. His biggest offence was to die at the hands of sinners. What was God's chosen one doing on a cross of execution? When God and the evil world meet, it is the evil world that should end up desolate!

One can understand why the New Testament writers were caught by the "stumbling-stone" metaphor in the eighth chapter of Isaiah. The crucifixion of Christ is a stumbling-block to us all. The notion, put forward in Hebrews 13, that Christ suffered outside the gate, like the tainted animals of the ancient sin-offering, is a stumbling-block. There is the offence over which we all stumble, that this unclean one is God's Christ.

God alone can put forward the idea that God's remedy for sin is to *bear it*.

On our own we can find out a lot about a guilt burden. Every time we think about our complicity in all that

is unjust in our world we experience a paralysing guilt.

But, if God is bearing sin, it follows that the burden of sin is an energizing burden to be under. A sin load is distinct from a guilt load and that is saving news indeed.

And the only sure and safe foundation for the truth of *that news* is God's word. God alone can be the author of that faith. Such is the New Testament understanding of the resurrection.

Speak Lord

Living God

Quicken us according to your word.

Your thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are your ways our ways.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are your ways than our ways and your thoughts than our thoughts.

What is wisdom to you looks like foolishness to us.

What is strength to you looks like weakness to us.

We stumble over the stone you make the headstone of the corner.

Your salvation is hidden from us in places we find offensive.

As the snow and the rain come down from heaven and water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, seed to the sower and bread to the

eater, so, O God, may your word be
that which goes forth from your
mouth.

May it not return unto you void.
Cause it to accomplish that which
you purpose and prosper it in the
matter for which you send it.
You raised Christ up. Establish his
reign in our lives.

Amen

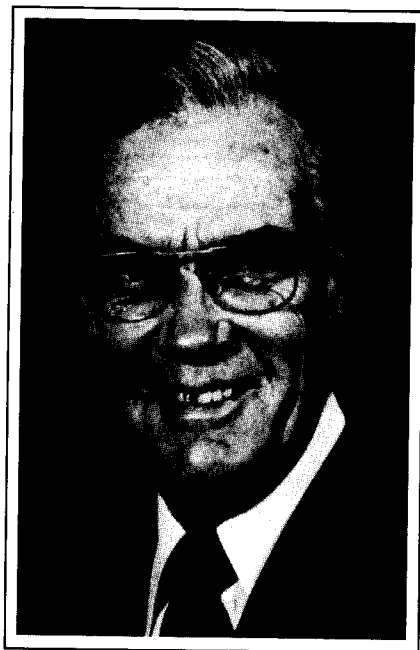
M.J.V. (Jack) Shaver

"Jack" Shaver was born in Fort William (Thunder Bay) in 1918. From the age of two to the year before his ordination he lived in the manse next door to Stella Mission, Winnipeg. Stella and Sutherland Missions were part of All People's Mission, first a Methodist, and then a United Church institution in the north end of Winnipeg. J.S. Woodsworth was superintendent at one time. Jack's father was superintendent from 1920 to 1941.

Jack graduated from United College (now the University of Winnipeg) and was ordained by Manitoba Conference in 1942. He married Dorothy Hamlet of Fort William. The Shavers have five children.

For the first 10 years Jack served two rural charges in Manitoba Conference, then seven years at Fort Garry United Church in suburban Winnipeg.

His next placement took the Shavers to Vancouver where Jack served 10 years as the United Church chaplain at the University of British Columbia. Following that he spent three years on the staff of an inter-presbytery urban council.



Jack's final 10 years in the ministry were spent on the staff of First United Church, a mission institution in downtown Vancouver. Jack retired in 1982 and he and Dorothy are living in Vancouver.

Good reading

Jack

