

Word of Life, Voices for Every Season

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Introduction

It was in 1984 that I first wrote a monologue with a Biblical theme. Rev. Stan Weary preached on the first resurrection morning. He used as his text 'Go tell my disciples and Peter'. Stan talked about how Peter must have felt and where he was likely to have been. That led to the piece 'A World Without' following Peter's journey through that first Easter weekend. You'll find it in the longer pieces in Section 2 of this book.

Over that Lent, and I think the next one, I performed the monologue at places as far apart as Blackpool and Winchester. I then went on to pursue other projects attempting to bring the Good News to people who wouldn't normally hear it.

Twenty years later the piece was revived. Six of the seven parts were presented as part of the Easter weekend worship at my home church. They were well received. Encouraged by this and the leadership team of the church I began writing more monologues reflecting on different characters within the Gospels. Many of these were used in acts of worship at my home church and elsewhere. This series culminated with the Lent Liturgy included as Section 4 of this book.

In producing this material for use by others in Worship and beyond, my greatest problem has been to decide on the order of the pieces. In the end I have used the Harmony of the Gospels to be found in the Life Application Study Bible (NIV version). I hope that will enable the right piece to be found for the occasion.

It is customary to offer thanks at this point to those who have helped in the preparation of this book. Many people have contributed through their support and comment, not the least being the members of the congregation at Earlsdon Methodist Church in Coventry. I must specifically mention Rev. Andrew de Ville who was the principle encouragement for much of this volume and Helen Holdforth who has served as my editor and proof reader over a number of years. Lastly, and most importantly, there is my wife Sue. When she came into my life in 2000 she awoke within me the muse that God had given me that had for many years lain dormant. Without her, without God, this collection would never have come into being.

Roger Price
Coventry, January, 2009

Introduction to the Second Edition

Over the intervening 4 years many things in my life have fallen apart – my relationship with my Church, my marriage and several of my closest friends have moved on or drifted away. Nevertheless, what I have written above still holds true.

It may be that only these words remain. I am confident that have they have come from God as a free gift. I offer them to you in the same way so that you can make up your own mind.

Roger Price
Coventry, January, 2013

Before we plunge into the events of the New Testament, and as someone else once said so much more effectively, let me begin at the beginning:

Letters Concerning the Making of the World

Genesis 1: 1 – 2:4

Introduction:

We've all had problems with builders. I wondered what would have happened if God had employed a builder to construct his world. And then, much to my surprise, in last Sunday's newspaper was an article quoting a translation of some papers that had been recently found in a cave on a hillside near the Dead Sea:

God,
Here, there and everywhere,

Dear Mr. Blenkinsop,

Many thanks for your recent tender for the construction of my new world. I was pleased to see that you can guarantee completion within seven days.

Please start immediately and keep me informed on your progress.

Yours eternally,

God.

Sebastian Blenkinsop,
Planet Makers to the Stars.

Dear God,

Many thanks for your instructions.

We'll be delighted to make a start immediately – which will be a week next Tuesday in the afternoon, once we've worked out when Tuesday is and as long as it is not raining.

Best Wishes,

Sebastian.

God
Always watching over you.
Evening of the first day.

Dear Sebastian,

I couldn't help noticing – because everything is under my watchful gaze – that despite you and your assistants arriving on site this morning, setting up the security fencing and your workman's hut, and drinking copious amount of tea nothing seems to have been done today.

I don't want to be one of those customers who is constantly on your back but I would be grateful if you could provide me with an explanation for this apparent lack of progress.

Yours anxiously,

God.

Sebastian Blenkinsop,
On site,
Evening of the first day.

Dear God,

Thank you for your communication which did seem a little terse. I do hope this is not going to set the tone for our relationship.

The lack of progress is down to the very difficult working conditions. The site seems to be completely covered with waters. Also complete darkness covers the face of these waters. I know we have a light machine but we cannot read the instructions – it being totally dark. However, once we overcome this problem I'm sure that we'll get back on track.

Yours gropingly,

Sebastian

God,
Always present,
Evening of the first day.

Blenkinsop,

Your “progress report” is quite offensive. You always knew that you would be working under difficult circumstances and you should have made adequate preparations before you moved on to site.

As to the absence of light, I did provide the machine you referred to in perfect working order. Surely there is at least one member of your team with enough common sense to locate the “on” switch? What do you expect me to do about it? Say something like “Let there be light” so that you can see what to do next?

You came highly recommended and I expect better things from you.

God.

Sebastian Blenkinsop
On Site
Evening of Day 2

Dear God,

I’m not sure what you did last evening but when we returned to the site this morning we could actually see what we were doing. Our engineers were quickly able to turn on the permanent light. We have spent all day carrying out the testing procedure and can confirm that it is good.

Unfortunately some of it got dropped and broke into all the component colours. We’ve tried to fit it all back together but it seems bent into some sort of bow shape and they won’t merge. What would you like us to do with this bit?

Ensuring you of our best attentions at all times,

Yours truly,

Sebastian.

God,
Brooding over the waters
Evening of Day 2

Dear Sebastian,

I'm sorry about yesterday. Your problems on day one made me wonder if the world was ever going to be finished on time – if at all. I can't help noticing that you are now a whole day behind schedule!

I've inspected the broken piece of light. It really is quite pretty. It's amazing how sometimes accidents produce fortunate results. I think we'll keep it. Please put it to one side until I can think of a use for it.

Yours apologetically,

God.

Sebastian Blenkinsop
On Site
Evening of Day 3

Dear God,

Thanks for your last. I am still confident that we can complete the project on time and under budget.

Today we have managed to separate the firmament from the waters. There was one slight snag. You ordered blue and pink stripes for the firmament but the supplier had run out of pink. In order not to fall further behind schedule we made the firmament all blue.

As it looked a little cold and uninviting we used some of the spare waters to run up some white, grey and black fluffy things to float around in it. I think it adds the necessary touch to make up for the lack of pink.

Yours Hopefully,

Sebastian.

God,
Surveying the firmament above and the waters beneath.
Evening of Day 3

Dear Sebastian,

I have looked at your handiwork and must say that it is really quite good. Almost inspired I might say. I think I will call the fluffy things clouds.

However, despite all that, please do not make any further alterations to the plans without consulting me first. You will remember that I am always available to you and never very far away.

Is there any chance you could pick up the pace and try and get back on schedule?

Yours hopefully,

God.

Sebastian Blenkinsop,
On Site,
Evening of Day 4

Dear God

The best I can say is that we are at least not losing any more time.

We have managed to separate the land from the sea as requested. As a result one of my team came up with a name for this place – Dirt. We think it fits quite nicely.

Because of the shortness of the time remaining, we have laid the land out as one big lump. This will speed up the process of distributing the creatures that creepeth when we get to them.

I'm sure this simple step alone will make sure we still finish on time.

Your ever humble servant,

Sebastian.

God,
Inspecting everything always.
Evening of day 4

Dear Mr. Blenkinsop,

God has a dinner engagement this evening. But before he left he asked me to write to you on his behalf.

He is a bit concerned about the distribution of the land. In the interests of seeing the project finished on time he will allow this to pass for the moment.

On the matter of the creatures that creepeth I have been asked to remind you that they will arrive tomorrow on schedule. You are to consider if it is possible to make any variation to the fitting out schedule so that their distribution can be accommodated before the installation of the seasons and the lights to rule the night and day.

Assuring you of his best attentions at all times

Gillian Small

Personal Assistant to God.

Sebastian Blenkinsop,
Dirt,
Evening of Day 5

Dear God,

Thank you for your note of yesterday. I hope you enjoyed your dinner date.

Today has been a day of good news and bad news.

The good news: The place is spinning as you wanted. Unfortunately it's at an angle but I think that's going to be of benefit in the long run. It seems it means the days won't always be the same length and will give variety to an otherwise predictable world.

The bad news: The spinning showed up a defect with the mountings of the land. Someone had forgotten to fit any. The one big mass broke up into several smaller pieces and started drifting apart. One or two bits have been bumping into one another creating interesting ridges where they meet. Don't worry the person responsible has been dealt with and the body buried under the bit that looks like a boot. The bits that bend upwards now gave my team the idea that we should call the place "Rocky" instead of "Dirt". What do you think?

Good news: We have rigged the orbs that will govern the night and day. Both seem to be working fine.

Bad news: The one that is designed for the night sky received a considerable amount of surface damage in transit. Some of my team even say that you can see a face in it. I've left it in place for now.

More bad news: The stars got split. We tried to sweep them up but there's still a big belt of them running across most of the night sky.

Yet more bad news: Problems with the creatures. I have had to return some. The dinosaurs were stored at the bottom of the pile and have all died. We've buried the bodies all over the place and quite deeply. Nobody should be able to find them which will be a good thing. We don't want anyone coming up with any crazy theories about the bones if they were found!

All this has made for a difficult day and we were not able to catch up on any of the outstanding work. However, we will start early tomorrow – as soon as the new sun is in the firmament – and I'm hopeful that we will get everything finished!

Yours confidently,

Sebastian.

God,
In the heavens,
Evening of Day 5.

Dear Mr. Blenkinsop,

You've had a difficult day? I've just spent several hours in communication with the owner of Hayden's Emporium for Miscellaneous Creatures. It seems that one of the animals rejected by yourself was the sabre toothed tiger. However, you failed to follow the correct return procedure. It was not packed in two cases, one inside the other, and was not labelled "Danger: Contains Live Sabre Toothed Tiger". The result was that the staff in the Returns Department were not adequately warned and two of them are missing – presumed eaten. Hayden is quite furious about this and is threatening to sue me saying it is clearly an act of god!

Will you instruct your staff to stop coming up with names for my world. I decided long ago it was going to be called "Earth" and that's an end to it.

I've inspected the damage to the lesser orb and find it is acceptable. Maybe those who look at it will think they are seeing my face, if anyone's, in the pock marks.

I am a little distressed with the chaos amongst the stars. I have looked at the constellations and can quite clearly see "The Large Saucepan". However, when it comes to "The Hunter" all I can easily locate is the belt! And as for that "band" of yours it looks more like someone's split milk across the cosmos! We'll just have to leave it for now as there are much more pressing matters.

Yours expectantly,

God.

Sebastian Blenkinsop,
Earth
Evening Day 6

Dear God,

We have finished!

As promised we have laboured hard all day and the project is complete.

There is still quite a bit of snagging to do but basically the work is done.

For instance when we released the beasts that creepeth some of them took off at quite a lick and ran all over the place. You may wish to issue a recall notice so that they can be adjusted to meet the original specification.

The land is still moving about. Bits are banging together and the ground is actually shaking from time to time. Red hot molten stuff is pouring out of holes in other bits. This is causing all sorts of damage on the surface.

The spinning has upset the “clouds” we created. They are dropping water all over the place. My team have even coined a term for it. They call it weather.

Surely you couldn’t have intended any of this for your perfect world?

And then there’s the “humankind” that you insisted was the last thing to be assembled and released. Did you know that there were two distinct forms? Neither of them seems to be paying any attention to the briefing sheets you provided for them. They just seem to be getting on with things as they want with no regard to anyone else. Perhaps you should consider eliminating them?

And that boot shaped country is beginning to smell a bit.

Nothing we can’t fix tomorrow.

Yours tired but happy,

Sebastian.

God,
Walking in the Gardens of Earth
Evening of Day 6

My dear Sebastian,

As I write I am looking over everything that you and your team has done and find that it is good. Very good in fact.

I’m sure we can all live with creatures that rush and run around, shaking ground, molten rocks, the “weather” and even smelly countries.

I think we’ll leave things just as they are. You and your team take tomorrow off – as I will myself. It’s been a long and busy few days and everyone deserves a day of rest.

If you can come and see me early on the next day I’d like to consult with you about another project. I’d like to build a new heaven and a new earth for surely this one won’t last forever. I believe we can take our time over this next one as I’ll make sure no-one moves in until I’m ready and they’re suitable tenants.

I share your concern over the defects in humankind. I believe that any alterations necessary are beyond your capabilities. In due course I’ll send my son to deal with them. Many thanks again and enjoy your day off.

Yours gratefully,

God

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Section 1 Short Reflections by Solo Voices

Sarah: A Mother's Lament *Genesis 22: 1-10*

He's taken my son and gone away. Two days ago he took my son. "The Lord has need of him," he says. He's taken my son.

I saw what he loaded on that donkey. I know what he's going to do with that wood, those coals and the knife. I know what he's going to be asked to do. There was no lamb, you see. Nor a goat. Not even a pigeon. Only the donkey, those two servants, him and my son. "The Lord has need of him." And, as always, he is going to answer that call.

He's done that every time. Whenever the call has come, he's responded. Left this place or that, always moving as directed, for a closer walk in tune with the Lord's will. It's easy for him. He hears those instructions so clearly. He always has. But I don't hear anything. None of us do. We have no idea what's going on. But this time he's taken my son and I do know what's going to happen.

My son is so precious to me – to both of us. He was promised to us by the Lord. We thought he would never come. We thought it was no longer possible what with us being so old. And he wanted a son so badly that we agreed that he should sleep with Hagar. She is so much younger and she would give him a healthy son. And she did.

Ishmael. First born of Abram. The longed for son and heir to the father of our people. Promised by the Lord and delivered. We were all glad that the promise had been fulfilled.

And then, against all the odds, I found myself with child. And Isaac was born. Now my husband was doubly happy. Not one healthy son but two! He felt young again and so did I. Until this latest call came and he took away my son. Now I feel old again, very old.

Why didn't he take Ishmael? He's the first born. He's the one who is not of pure blood. He's the one that was not the Lord's gift to his people. Why didn't he take him with him - and the wood - and the coals - and the knife? Why did my son have to go to the place of sacrifice?

I know what's going to happen there. I know how those events will unfold. They'll lay the wood on the altar and make ready to light it with the coals. That he'll take the knife, strike down my son and offer his body to the flames on the altar as a sacrifice to the Lord, praying that it will be acceptable to him.

But he is my son. He may not be the first born of the family, but he is my first born – my only son. And he is going to be sacrificed for the Lord's chosen people. And there's nothing I can do to save him. Only a miracle born out of the love the Lord has for his people can save him now.

Why did it have to be my son? What about him? If he had a son would he be prepared to sacrifice him for us? That would be a worthy sacrifice.

And he's taken away my son.

Jonah He Lived in a Whale *Jonah 1:1-2:10*

Why am I still alive? There's no reason for it. I went against his will and I felt sure he should smite me for it. And yet I live.

I was allowed to get on that boat. He could have stopped that. He could have struck me down when I stood on the dockside looking for an escape route. He didn't have to let me get away. It would have taken no effort at all. In an instant there'd I be - dead. And yet I live.

And when I was on the boat and the storm came, I could have died then. When I told the sailors and the others who were travelling with me that it was all my fault – the storm that threatened to engulf us all – it could have all finished there and then. They could have turned against me, torn me limb from limb and killed me. And yet I live.

Oh, it's true that in the end I persuaded them to at least throw me over the side in order to calm the storm, to appease the Lord, but even then they showed pity on me. They prayed for me as they consigned me to those turbulent, storm tossed, waters. They asked for mercy for me as they threw me to what we all knew was going to be certain death. And yet I live.

If you can call this living! What are the chances, do you think, of a big fish turning up at just the right moment – just as I was sinking into the boiling foam of the sea for the third or fourth time – I'd lost count but I knew that it was definitely the last? And even if it happens to be swimming along, why would it bother to swallow me unless it wanted to make a meal of me – to crunch my bones and chew my flesh as my body passes from life to death along the way from mouth to stomach? But here I am, more or less in one piece, soaking wet and smelling more than a little of fish. And yet I still live.

I chose to disobey the instructions from the all powerful and ever present Lord whom I claim to serve. I knew exactly what I was doing. I didn't want to go to that ungodly place as he told me to. I didn't want to follow the instructions. I turned my back on him and his salvation and yet I still live.

I don't understand it. Is he trying to teach me a lesson? Is he trying to show me that like Adam and Eve in the garden punishment follows disobedience? Or is he waiting for me to be like father Abraham, obedient even in the face of death. Being prepared to let go of self in order to do his will? Is that what this dark and dank incarceration is all about? But going to that place with those undesirable and heathen people is a fate worse than death. And yet even Nineveh has got to be better than this.

So, what do I do? Do I say that after all I'll do what he asks of me and take his message to the ungodly people? Is that all it takes to put things right between us – a simple prayer? And what will he do then? What will happen then?

It's scary, I think. But things can't get much worse than this, can they? Time to find out I think. Here goes: I'm sorry, Lord. Thy will be done.

The Old Inn in Bethlehem

Matthew 2: 1-15; Luke 2: 1-20

Well, you wouldn't believe the week I've had. Here. Let me just take the weight of me feet for a few minutes and I'll tell you all about it.

Don't get me wrong, we were expecting it to be a rough time ever since that Emperor chappie decided he was going to count us. And we all know what that's all about, don't we? Once he knows how many there are of us, he'll know where to find us when it comes to sending the tax collectors round. Typical of governments, I'd say. We do all the work and then they steal it off us for their own ends.

No. We knew we were going to be busy because everyone had to go back to their family's home town to make the counting easier. So they'd be droves of them coming here to Bethlehem, loads of David's descendents turning up at their ancestral home. And what's more some of our best helpers were going to have to go off to their family's home town and leave us shorthanded!

Still, Eli and I – Eli's my husband by the way – we'd done the best we could to make all the arrangements, got some extra help from some of the regulars who were staying in town and rolled our sleeves up ready for the rush. And boy, did we get a rush! Every day more and more people turned up and if they weren't looking for somewhere to stay, it was a hot meal and a drink or two. I'll tell you after a couple of days we hadn't even got a cupboard that we could put anyone to sleep in and there were only two choices on the food front – take it or leave it.

Eli knew that we were full as well so it came as a bit of a surprise when he popped his head around the kitchen door where I was stirring the fish stew and said "I've given them the stable. You'll have to sort it." I can tell you I was none too pleased with that. I gave the stirring over to Miriam – you know, the shoemaker's daughter – and went after him. "Sort what?" I says. "You'll see," says he. "It's woman's work." That really got me going. "If you think I'm going to clean out that stable just so some Johnny come lately ne'er do wells came sleep in it ..." I started. He cut me off. "Go and look then you're understand," he said. The way he said it and the look on his face showed me he was serious, deadly serious. So I went and looked for myself.

And what I saw was a young woman – no more than a slip of a girl – about to give birth to her baby. From the look on her face – and that of her husband's – it was going to be their first. That's what Eli meant by it being 'woman's work'. So I sent for a couple of the others who knew about this sort of thing and got on with the woman's work. In no time at all we had a fine baby boy and a new mother wondering what was going to become of him.

And that's when the chaos started.

We'd barely got the pair of them cleaned up and the baby wrapped up in the linen bands when the outside door of the stable opened. Peeping round it came a face that took in the scene and disappeared again. I recognised Ned the shepherd boy and heard his voice outside saying "It's here, this is the place!" I shouted "Ned. This is no place for you at the moment. Go and see Eli and ask him to give you a drink."

I'd barely finished speaking when the door was opened again – and this time it was opened wide. I could see Ned again and realised that there was more of his mob with him. I think it was the whole lot of those who should have been out guarding the flocks on the hillside. Now that really made me worried – as if some great danger had befallen them and they'd come into town for safety. Ned must have seen I was worried because he spoke to put my mind at ease.

“No missus,” he says, “there’s nothing to worry about. We’ve been sent to see him.” I looked at the father then – to see if there was anything special about him that would bring men down from the hills to greet him but he looked like just an ordinary working man. Ned must have seen me look because he went on: “Not the father – the baby.” That really threw me, I can tell you. After all I’d helped birth that boy child and I knew that he was just an ordinary baby – nothing special at all. I was about to tell Ned and the others that but before I could open my mouth they’d all made their way into the stable, shut the door and were gathered round the baby and his mother. Ned had even placed a lamb next to him as some sort of gift.

Well, I can tell you I was a little confused by all this but the parents didn’t seem upset by all of the attention so I left them to it. Ned popped in for a drink a bit later so I was able to ask him how come they’d all turned up at my stable in the middle of the night. He told me that they’d seen lights in the sky and voices had told them to come down into town to greet a new born king. That’s when I sent him and the others packing. Not only had they left their livelihood unguarded on that hillside, it’s obvious they’d been drinking on the job. I won’t serve drunks in my inn at any time!

But that’s not the end of it. We’d just locked up in the early hours of the next morning when there came a ferocious knocking at the door. I drew back the bolts and was about to give whoever it was a mouthful – and to tell them we were closed and had no room – when I saw who it was that was knocking. He wasn’t from round here. Even though he was clearly a servant his clothes were far finer than anything that’s in my wardrobe I can tell you. And in the shadows behind him were clearly his masters – riding on camels! Yes, camels! You don’t see many of them in this part of the world I can tell you.

Before I could open my mouth the servant bloke asked me all polite and formal like where they could find the baby because they had been guided to this place. Guided! I couldn’t think of anything to say so I just pointed and the whole lot of them trooped off to the stable. I sneaked out a bit later and they were all gathered round the family – just like the shepherds had been. They’d bought gifts as well – though they looked like being of a bit finer than the lamb that Ned’s crew had brought. Everyone still seemed happy so I left them to it.

By the time I got up the next morning those strange fellows had gone and the new family were busy packing up for a journey as well. I told them it was foolish to move a baby and his mother this soon but the husband was having none of it. He said they had to leave as soon as possible. I watched them as they went out of town and was surprised that they took the south road. Nothing lies in that direction except the desert – and Egypt if you go far enough. But they seem to know what they’re doing so live and let live I say.

And today, just when I thought all the chaos was over and things are getting back to normal, I hear there’s a whole company of Romans heading this way. It’s a good job that family has moved out of the stable – we’re going to need that space for some of their horses. Don’t know what they’re going to want down here. But then, they’re probably only following orders and that’s one thing the Romans are good at - following orders.

Ah well, must get on. It’s time to get Eli up and working. ... Here. You don’t think those Romans have orders to come and see that baby as well, do you? Well, if that’s the case they’re too late. They’ll have to wait a long time before he’s back in this neck of the woods I’d say. It could be years before they can carry out any orders they’ve got regarding that little boy.

Simeon: Waiting a Lifetime

Luke 2: 25-35

Waiting. It is all I seem to do nowadays. To come to this most holy of places and wait. But it was not always like this. I use to travel. My work took me from place to place - all over Judea, and even into Samaria. But there, being a Jew, the business was hard.

But now I am an old man. Far too old to travel about the place. Now it takes me all my time to struggle here to Solomon’s great Temple. Here I sit in the precincts and wait. The warm sun heats an old man’s body and eases the aches of the years. The priests and scribes know me and stop to share a word when their duties permit. And there are always people coming and going who need a little help to find their way through the complexity of this place.

In between I’ll wait. My family they think I’m stupid. In these the autumn days of my life they want me to be with them, so that they can look after me. Look after me? Fuss over me they mean, make themselves useful so that I’ll promise them something of what I have when I die. They don’t listen. They don’t understand when I tell them it’s all about the promise.

You know of the promise, don’t you? Every Jew knows about the promise. Even the great prophet Isaiah knew about the promise. He wrote about it: “The Lord will use His holy power. He will save His people and all the world will see it.” And all the world will see it. That’s the promise. That’s what I’m waiting for.

Oh, I know what you’re thinking. You’re just like my youngest who thinks I’ve lost it. Just another old fool sitting in the sun waiting for a promise to be fulfilled that might not happen for a hundred years yet. But I know. It’s not going to be a hundred

years. It's coming. It's very close. That promise is going to be fulfilled soon - maybe even now.

That's why each day I come to this place and wait. Here I know the very presence of the Lord and I know that He is coming - the one to redeem His people - praise God. I've been touched with an inner peace. I suppose it's come from praying about it and trusting and hoping that my eyes will see Him.

And all the world will see it.

So that's why each day I come here to my place in the sun and wait. That's why I search the faces of everyone who passes me - old and young alike - expecting to greet him. That's why I pray to God for the strength to still be here when His great light will burst upon His world. That's what I'm waiting for.

It's the waiting that keeps me going.

What keeps you going? Are you waiting for something?

Is your life filled with expectation? An anticipation? Or do you simply act out of duty or habit? Perhaps you depend on others to fill your life and lead you from place to place.

So, I'll ask you again. Are you waiting for something? Each and every one of you - the expecting, anticipating, duty servicing, habitual and baggage. Are you waiting for something?

All I can say is if you're not waiting for anything you'll never know the joy of having that waiting fulfilled

So, I ask you again. Are you waiting for something? Are you waiting for something to happen in this place at this time? What's in your heart? Are you expecting something to happen?

Have you come with an anticipation that something wonderful and world shattering is about to happen in your life - exclusively to you - to fulfil the hopes and dreams of your lifetime? Do you feel a life changing event is about to thrust itself upon you? No? No matter. Even your lack of preparedness cannot shut out the power that surrounds us all in this place at this time. Can't you feel it? I can. I know my waiting is almost over So, if you're not waiting for something, maybe you should be - or maybe you are about to be surprised.

Maybe you're thinking that when my waiting is over it will be an ending. Maybe you feel that life will have lost all purpose when the promise is fulfilled. Maybe you'll even go as far as saying that all that will be left for me to do is to die when my waiting is over. But you'd be wrong. That ending will be a beginning, a new, fresh start. The start of a new life for me and everyone who is prepared to share my wait.

A Tale From a Riverbank

Matthew 3: 13-17; Mark 1: 9-11; Luke 3: 21-22

Just who did he think he was? Pushing in like that - jumping the queue.

I was here just after first light. I'd heard the prophet would be here as well. I'd waited like the rest for him to come here by the river and share his message of hope and redemption with us. I listened to his call to repent and searched my heart for all those things I'd done wrong and those right things that I left undone. I thought about what the Law said and the teachings of the Prophets and weighed them all against my actions and inactions. I really worked at it to feel that my repentance was complete.

Then, when I felt that I was ready to respond to John's call to go into the water of the river and have my sins washed away, I joined the line - the long line by then - that ended in front of John so that I too could be made ready for the Kingdom of Heaven that was being promised.

I remember standing in that line, that slow moving line, reflecting on what that Kingdom would look like. I remembered that God had promised that he would send one to lead us into that new kingdom of his. He would be a teacher, he would be a healer, he would be a leader who would help us overthrow our enemies and claim what was rightly promised to God's chosen people.

In my state of personal repentance I was anticipating the imminent coming of the Lord's promised Messiah. Maybe it would happen today. Maybe after my sins had been washed away there would be some dramatic change worked in my heart, some fundamental transformation of river water and washing into something deeper, more profound, more meaningful to the Lord and his people gathered, like me, in this river - waiting, expecting, anticipating the coming of salvation for all of us.

And then this - nobody - simply turns up out of nowhere and wades into the river. He takes no notice of the rest of us and goes straight up to John. The ones at the front were about to make their objections when they saw that something had passed between them - John and this newcomer. A look? A word? A gesture? I'm not sure. I was still some way back but it was clear

that something had happened. And then the strangest thing happened.

John started to try and kneel down into the water in front of this newcomer. It looked for all the world that John was going to have his sins washed away instead of the other way round. But before he got very far the newcomer stopped John and drew him back to his feet. That's when I looked again at this queue jumper – and I gave him a good, long, hard look I can tell you. But he didn't seem special at all.

He just seemed to be another ordinary bloke who had heard the message that John was proclaiming and had come to the river to be cleansed. And he was a normal bloke, if you get what I mean. He was wearing everyday robes and his hair was all neat and tidy. He was clearly different from John with his animal skins and untamed look. But I couldn't help feel they knew each.

The newcomer knelt down into the water and John performed the ritual cleansing for all sins. He was then drawn up out of the water and there was one of those moments when it seemed like everything simply stood still. It was as if my earlier anticipation of the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven had been fulfilled but, after the moment had passed, everything was back as it was.

The water in the river still flowed. The people in the queue like me were still impatient to get to the front so they could have their turn in the cleansing ritual. The wind still blew hot and dry out of the desert and the birds still flew above us as we waited. And I remember watching this Johnny come lately simply get back to his feet and turn his face into the wind and purposefully stride out of the waters. I could see John watching him for a minute – or maybe he was looking at the dove that seemed to be flying in the same direction – and then he, too, went back to normal with the washing and the cleansing.

I was quite disappointed then. I thought in that special moment when time seemed to stop something fundamentally earth shattering was going to happen and the Kingdom of heaven was going to burst in upon us all. But all that goes to show is that sometimes you have to wait for the prophecies to come true. You have to go on in faith.

I remember watching the ordinary man walking away from the river and into the desert. And I remembered shivering as I watched. Maybe it was because I'd been standing in cold river water up to my knees for most of the morning. Or maybe it was because I'd thought that one man who jumped the queue for cleansing was special and my hopes had been dashed. Maybe I was thinking that even this message of hope for the on hand Kingdom of Heaven was just another 'jam tomorrow' prophecy from someone who'd had his brains addled by the desert sun.

I suppose at that point I should have simply left the queue and gone about my business. But something made me hang on and take my turn to be pushed under the cleansing waters.

When I came up out of the waters the first thing I saw clearly was the same figure striding off into the desert. My first thought was we wouldn't see him again if he carried on going that way. And then I thought how on earth could one man change the world? If the Kingdom of Heaven is truly at hand, surely we'd see signs and wonders and the Messiah would arrive with armies of angels and others from the heavenly hosts. It wouldn't have been an ordinary man pushing his way to the front of a queue in order to have his sins washed away and then to go striding off into the desert with only a dove for company. I don't know how God was going to work out his plan for his people but it couldn't be that simple, could it?

Frustrated Temptation

Matthew 4: 1-11; Mark 1: 12-13; Luke 4: 1-13

I thought I had him. Three times I thought I had him.

He was all on his own. He had been for quite a while. But I bided my time. I didn't want to act too soon. I wanted to wait for just the right moment. And I thought my timing was just right. I thought I had him. I **really** thought I had him. Keep it simple stupid, I said to myself - let's keep it simple. Let's find a weak spot and exploit it. If I can just get a toehold I can open him up like a can of beans I thought. So that's what I did. I started with his most obvious need. I mean, he'd been out in the wilderness for getting on for 6 weeks by now and it was obvious what he was going to want, going to need: a good square meal – or even anything to eat. After that length of fasting even simple bread would seem like a banquet to him.

So that's where I started. I knew the power he'd got. I knew the things he could do. I knew how he could change the ordinary and the mundane. And he knew it too. And yet, it was all bottled up inside of him. He was struggling with it – I could tell. He was trying to make sense of what had happened when he came out of that water. He wasn't sure what he was really meant to do. The power was inside him and he didn't know in what direction to release it.

So I gave him the option. I looked at his immediate and obvious need and showed him how his power could change the very stones of the wilderness into bread that he could eat. Soft, fresh, crumbling, still warm from the oven bread to ease the hunger pangs that I knew were tying his stomach into knots.

Bound to work, I thought. He's bound to look after the inner self, I felt. He's bound to fall into my trap and open the crack so I could simply get in there. I knew it was going to happen. So, what did he do?

He slammed the door straight into my face. He used the power of the words of the prophets to swat me away like you would a troublesome fly. 'Man does not live by bread alone.' What sort of statement is that from a starving man? Surely if there was food for the taking, he'd use anything at his disposal to get his hands on it?

But he didn't – and that really wrong footed me. I had to go back to the drawing board and try and work out exactly what he was doing out here all on his own.

Then it came to me. He was planning. He was scheming. He was working out how to get his campaign underway. And we all know why people make plans and what the objective of them is, don't we? He wanted power and wasn't really sure how to go about getting it.

That's my department, I thought. I know all about power and how to control it. It's by having something that everyone wants – be it wealth, status, acknowledgement, control over others, whatever – and making sure you use it for your own ends. I've been doing it since the beginning of time. I've been exploiting others ever since the apple in the garden ploy. So I could offer him power – and only later would he realise that in taking power for himself, he had handed to me the power over him and all who served him.

So I showed him how I could offer that power. I showed him all the countries of the world and explained they were my gift to give to him. And then he went and did it again. Once more he quoted scripture at me and totally defeated my argument. He's a slippery customer this one. He seems to know everything out of the law and the prophets off by heart. He can even quote the Psalms from memory! That really shook me. Knocked me off my stride for a bit I can tell you.

So I thought about it for a bit more then. In the end I realised that I would have to fight fire with fire. I started going through the scriptures myself and came up with the bit out of David's Psalms that seemed to fit the bill. It spoke about how he would be looked after no matter what. So I took him to the centre of God's earthly presence – the temple in Jerusalem - and encouraged him to jump off. We both knew nothing would happen to him. We both knew that he'd be taken care of. And I told him how it would be a good thing and reveal his true nature to all who saw or heard about it.

But that didn't work either. He topped my scripture with one of his own. And I knew this battle was lost. I knew that there was nothing I could do to shake his will. But this is not the end of it.

As I watched those others ministering to him, I was already working on a new plan. I was already scheming to get my hands on him and everything he stood for. Can't get my claws into him, can I? Well, one day he's going to have people around him whom he'll trust. He might even call them friends. And they'll be ordinary people – just like you. Maybe if I can turn just one of them to my way of thinking, maybe then his whole house of cards of fresh ideas will come tumbling down.

That way I'll win despite his best efforts. I might have lost the battle but I'm determined to win the war. And I'll see him lifted up high as my trophy for everyone to see my victory. And when I'm satisfied that he has suffered enough pain, humiliation and torment for the insults he dealt me by rejecting my approaches in this wilderness, that's when I'll let him die.

That's when he'll regret not giving into my temptations in the desert.

A Steward at a Wedding in Cana Finds Truth in a Jar of Wine

John 2: 1-10

You wanted to see me? You know how busy I am with all these wedding arrangements to deal with? So you'll understand I can't stand around talking all afternoon - there's things to organise. So, what was it you ... excuse me a second ... Nathaniel! Put that down this instant. I told you to go and get some more clean towels to wipe the feet of the late comers, not to help yourself to the leftovers from the wedding board. ... Yes, I know, you've been on the go since cock crow, but I was up half the night and you don't see me flagging. Samuel was with me as well and he's still at it. What's that you say? He's lying down in the kitchen fast asleep? Well, I'll deal with him in a minute. You just stop feeding your face and get on with the job I gave you. There'll be plenty of time to rest on the Sabbath tomorrow.

You see what it's like? Turn your back for a minute and it all goes to pot. We really are going to have to make this brief. I've still got important things to do before this wedding is over. So, what was it you wanted to ask me about?

The wine? Nothing special about the wine. Jacob the wine merchant - you know the one, has his storeroom hard up against the hillside - he supplied it. A nice light, refreshing wine made from the season before last first pressing. Matured in oak barrels, if remember right, and racked off into the stone jars about a month ago so it had plenty of time to settle.

Ah. I know what you're on about. I'm sorry it's run out but there was that accident with the donkey cart. And I did what I could to make amends. I went round apologising for the shortfall. One of the ladies said it didn't matter. So I stopped worrying then.

This isn't just a complaint because you didn't get enough to drink is it? Because, if it is I've got no time for this. There's lot

more important things I've got to do ...

Not that wine? What do you mean, not THAT wine? It's the only wine I've served. The other wine? Which wine would that be then?

The one in the stone jars by the wall? That's not wine - that's water. This bloke - I think he's one of the guests - he told me to get some stone jars and fill them with water. I thought he'd decided that as the wine had run out, everyone had had more than enough to drink and would be wanting water now to quench their thirst.

And you're telling me that the jars are full of wine now? Are you sure you haven't had too much to drink? See for myself? You're damn right I'm going to see for myself. I'm the Steward here and no-one else is going to muck about with my plans for this wedding.

Nathaniel! Stop what you're doing and come here. Yes, I know I told you to get towels to dry the guests feet but Rebecca can finish that job on her own. I want you to do something else for me. Go over to those water jars - you know the ones we brought in earlier when the wine had run out - and fetch me a beaker of whatever it is that is in them. Never mind if I'm thirsty or not - never mind that the water from the well will be cooler and more refreshing than that which has stood there for the last half hour or so. Just do as I say and leave the thinking to me.

You can't get the staff, you know. Everyone wants to be a shepherd these days. They all want to spend their days and nights out on the hillside far from the hustle and bustle of this place - not to mention far beyond the reach of our Roman friends! They soon change their minds when the wolves come sneaking up on the flocks in the autumn. Then working in domestic service doesn't seem half as bad.

No Nathaniel, I'm not calling you a wolf. You're my good and loyal servant - all be it a bit slow. So this is the water? Right. ...

... You're right. This IS wine. And a very fine wine at that. This is not anything that Jacob can produce. It's got a hint of blackberry and lingers on the pallette like fragrant flowers picked with the dew drops of dawn still upon it. This wine must have come all the way from Jerusalem it's so fine. So, who's been messing with my water jars?

What's that you say Nathaniel? You saw that guest go over but all he did was wave his hands over them? That wouldn't change water into wine. It'd be a miracle if that were to happen!

Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'll look into it. I might even get the authorities involved. Someone's got to pay for doing things like this - sooner or later.

Nicodemus Muses on Experiencing a Death and No Rebirth

John 3: 1-21

I am an old man. It seems now like I've been an old man for all my life. But I was young once. I was loyal - to my family, to the law and the prophets, to the synagogue. I studied hard and learnt all my lessons. And the elders were impressed by me. So it was that I rose, in time, to be a member of the High Council.

I suppose that's when I began to become old. Weighed down with the responsibilities of teaching and leading and passing judgement on my people. Having those sorts of pressures makes anyone old very quickly. Even though the pressures were shared amongst the others on the council, it seemed like I was the only one who made any decisions. I felt I was all on my own - and I longed for change.

And then we on the Council began to hear about this man called Jesus. He was gathering a large crowd of followers. People were proclaiming him as a new and extraordinary teacher. There was much talk of miraculous healings that he had performed. This was surely something that the Council should look into. We talked about it often - but never could we decide on a unified course of action.

You see too many of the others were older than me. They had become fixed and settled in their ways. They were resistant to any change. The Law was the Law and the Council's job was to preserve it, interpret it and enforce it. There was no need for any new teachings. These would only threaten what was known to be right. Any threat such as that needed to be suppressed and eliminated as soon as possible. The majority of the Council began making plans in secret to do just that.

They began to gather the evidence about the so called healings. They sent junior members of our ranks to talk to those who had claimed this had happened to them. At first they were reluctant to talk, saying that this Jesus had instructed them to keep the events secret. But under pressure every one of them told the same story. What had been claimed was true. This self appointed teacher was able to perform miraculous healings - and it looked like those who were closest to him were doing the same!

That put the Council into a muddle, I can tell you. Their best chance of getting rid of him gone because he did do what he claimed to do. That's when we changed our tactics. That's when it was decided that we would use the weight of the law to trap him. No one knew the law better than the members of the council. So I was put in charge of the plan to ensnare him. To trap him into saying things against the law that could be used against him. Once we had that evidence, then we could bring him to trial, and dispose of him forever.

We spent many hours pondering what we could ask him. Our energies went into devising situations where we could force him to condemn himself. Time after time we sent some of the younger members of our order to see him, armed with the most difficult and complex of problems under the Law. Every time he had an answer for them - for us. When we weighed those answers, we could find no fault in them. We had to think again, try again, desperately search for a way to remove him from the scene.

While this was going on a strange thing happened to me. You see, I was given the task of keeping the records of these questions and Jesus's answers, along with all the other evidence we had gathered about him. The more I reviewed the papers, the more I wanted to meet this man for myself. The more I wanted to hear first hand what he was saying.

Of course, it was impossible for someone like me, someone with my status, someone with my responsibilities to just walk up to him in broad daylight. It would be giving him exactly what we were working at to undermine. It would be seen as the Council endorsing his actions. There was no way my fellow members would condone that. But I had to meet him - face to face.

It took some time to set up but in the end I achieved it. I found out where he was staying one night close to my house and under the cover of darkness went to see him. And that set in motion the strange chain of events that find me where I am today. And the strangest thing of all about that first night was that he seemed to know I was coming. He was expecting me. He seemed to know why I had come and had something he wanted to say to me, just to me.

Not that I understood it then. Not that I fully understand it now. This business about being "born again". I'm still waiting to see what that really means even now! Yet that meeting did change me. It made me realise that he was a very special teacher and a remarkable man. I could find no fault in him. And I realised that all the evidence that the Council had collected was worthless - because none of it showed any wrong doing at all.

After that night I began to work behind the scenes to try and encourage others to look honestly at what Jesus was saying and doing. I tried to break down their prejudice and consider if some of it just might make sense. I quoted the Law as Jesus quoted it. But they were having none of it. Their minds were made up. Their resolve was firm. He was their enemy and had to be eliminated.

And so it was that despite my best efforts they worked out the plot to take him prisoner and have him destroyed. I remember that night well. The guards dragged him before the Council and got an earful for their trouble. The Council were in no mood to hear that their servants felt there was something special about this man. They weren't even in the mood to hear about justice and fairness in a trial from one of their own number. When I spoke up about those the threat was clear from the rest on them. I was told to keep silent or prepare to face the same fate as Jesus the so called prophet.

To my eternal shame I kept silent. To my horror the events ran their course. And now, in my guilt, I acknowledge that I share the blame for the death of this man at the hands of the Romans. This man who only ever spoke about peace and love. This man who only ever offered help and support to those who needed it. This man who only ever championed the causes of those without leaders. This man who only ever did what the Council should have done lay dead at the Council's own hands.

I suppose it was then that I decided that I had to stand up for the one who had stood up for so many others. His closest followers were scattered, broken and demoralised. So it fell to me and another who had similarly been affected by these events to see that his body received a proper burial. Now I'm in the open as a follower of his teachings. Now I'm an outcast amongst the Council and all my old friends despise me. Now I am very, very old.

It's true I've got some new friends. The closest of his followers - probably kindness repaying kindness - have asked me to join them after the Sabbath. To share a meal with them and to talk about their friend and my gifted teacher. But what do I have to share with them? I only spoke to him the once and all he said to me still confuses. "Man must be born again."

Why it's as likely as him getting up out of the tomb we laid him into. Or as likely as a fisherman who's lived all his life in Galilee being able to talk to Greeks or Egyptians or Arabs in their own language. Or it's as likely as one man's life being brought so cruelly to a seemingly legal and necessary end changing the way we all think, believe and act in this god forsaken world.

But I'll go. No more shadows or sidelines for me. Because of what I did - or didn't do - Jesus died. It follows that I must do all that I can, use all my skills and talents to repaying that debt. I know I'm going to need help. I trust that I'm going to find it amongst others who knew him personally.

And who knows? Maybe one day soon I will understand what it means to be born again!

John the Baptist: Laying Down the Burden

John 3: 22-30

Now, at last, the final burden has been lifted from me. As Andrew and my other most faithful of servants leave me and go to follow the master - my master - I am at last free to follow my own destiny. My work is over. My calling is complete. My fate awaits me.

I knew from the start - perhaps even before that - my role was to go before. I was even born before him, my cousin, and every step of my upbringing has brought me to this point. All that time spent studying the laws and the prophets, all those hours at the synagogue, all those days of prayer and contemplation so that I could proudly proclaim the coming of the Lord.

It's not been an easy road. Even in the small village where I spent my childhood there were distractions - always something to draw my attention to worldly matters and take my eyes off the higher calling. That's why I went out into the wilderness as soon as I could. That's why I sought others who were using the emptiness and silence of that place to be closer to god.

But I didn't stay there. I woke up one morning and knew that the time of my preparation was complete. I knew I had to return to be amongst the ordinary people and fulfil that which had been prophesied for me. So I came out of the wilderness and into the towns and villages around the River Jordan.

Even with what I knew deep down inside I was not prepared for the reaction that provoked. I know I must have looked a sight after all that time in the desert lands. I know my clothes were caked in dust and I'd taken to wearing animal skins because they were warm by night and cool by day. And, of course, my hair and beard were unkept and filthy. But to be treated like some wild man who'd had to eat insects to survive, to have parents hide their children's faces so that they wouldn't be frightened, to be avoided as if I was a leper or had some other skin disease, was not going to make my calling any easier.

And then, and then, it came to me. That even with my appearance, even with that journey back after the time apart, God was giving me authority to proclaim the message that he had charged me to announce. One day, on the banks of the River Jordan, when I stopped to wash myself, it came to me. Those words of the great prophet Isaiah echoed in my mind: "I hear the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord."

That stopped me in mid wash, I can tell you. I just sat there watching the water I was about to use to clean my face run out of my fingers and wondered at the attention to detail of our God. I don't know how long I sat there after that revelation but I do know that I was reflecting on everything I'd ever read and learnt. Once I'd listened to what they said and now I knew what they meant. And more importantly I knew what my part was in all of it. That's when I chose to take up the burden that had been prepared for me.

So there I was sitting by a river in the bright sunshine of God's day knowing that He had called me to act for him. I even knew the message that I had to spread. I had been chosen to be the one to proclaim the coming of the Messiah - the chosen one who would lead his people to salvation. But I didn't know how to go about it. So, for a time, I just sat there and thought. But nothing came to me.

In the end, towards evening I guess, I remembered what it was I was doing when the thought had come. I was having a wash. I remember thinking that perhaps if I finished that job God would help me find how to take up the new one He had revealed to me. So, once more I bent to the river and took a double handful of its water. And in that action God spoke to me again. That's when I knew I had to call people to wash themselves clean of their sins.

Don't get me wrong. Having a good wash is nothing new to us Jews. The laws make us obsessed with the idea of things being clean and unclean. The priests regularly undergo ritual cleansing by bathing themselves before going into parts of the Temple in Jerusalem. They say that it's because Moses washed Aaron all those years ago. So it wasn't that I was introducing something new - only a new way of looking at it.

On that riverbank in the calm and cool of that evening God showed me how washing with water could be used by everyone to prepare themselves for a meeting with their Lord. That's the message I was to announce and baptism was the visual and practical aid to that proclamation. And, I have to admit, God was right. It worked.

Soon people were flocking to hear me and to have their sins washed away under my guidance. It wasn't as if I was saying anything new. We had known that the Messiah would come to save his people. All that was different was that I told people that the time of his coming was imminent and that they had to prepare for it. I still had one problem though. I had no idea who the Messiah was and when exactly he was going to appear.

That was until my cousin turned up. It was just another day at the River with crowds of people wanting to hear me and waiting their turn in the water. And then up he walks. People could tell there was something different about him by the way he moved. But I knew that my prophecy was coming true before me. Here was the man who had come to redeem God's people.

I'd known him all my life - and his. Our families had been close and always visiting one another for this festival and that celebration. We'd grown up together. We'd played together. It had only been my realisation that I was different that had driven me out into the desert. That's all that had separated us. And now, when the expectation amongst the people built up by my ministry was at its greatest, here he was walking back into my life. And I knew why he was here - there - now - then.

My heart leapt. I wanted to throw myself at his knees in the water and let him wash me clean. But something about his eyes told me that would be wrong. Something told me that part of the burden I was to carry was to play my part at this defining moment of his calling. I was to wash him clean of his sin so that he would be free to start his greater ministry.

And that's what I did. I bent down, took the waters of the river which are the life blood to our nation and washed him. Those around knew something special was happening. Stillness came over the jostling crowd. My closest helpers suddenly didn't have anything to do and were free to watch what was happening. Some said they saw a white bird fly down and rest on his shoulders. Others said they heard a voice that seemed to come from nowhere speaking in praise and honour of the occasion. All I know is that I looked into the depths of my cousin's eyes and saw greatness released by the simple act of washing him with water.

And then, he was gone. Just like that. He was up out of the water and off into the wastelands that I knew so well. The crowds knew the moment was over and were all anxious to get close to me again. To have me wash them. Overlooking their chance of a deeper cleansing in their urgency to embrace the popular and obvious. And I guess I got caught up in that as well.

I could have stopped there and then. I could have followed him out into the desert. Having done my part I could have gone after him and watched him play his. But no. That was not to be. I still had to carry my burden and prepare his people to receive him and his message.

Maybe his time had not yet fully come. Maybe what had been set in motion by the washing in the water had to be fulfilled by some deeper washing. Maybe there was to be a second anointing but this would be of power and fire rather than water. I didn't know. All I knew that day was that something had been set in motion and I had crowds of people who all wanted to have their sins washed away.

But today I did know that the time was right. I knew that it was the time to lay down my burden. Today I watched him come back and listened to what he had to say. I knew that he was ready and that his greater ministry had begun. So I chose to lay aside my burden and to tell those closest to me that it was time for them to follow another.

It's strange though, some burdens you simply can't lay down. I'll still tell anyone who is prepared to listen that the first step towards eternal life is to have their sins symbolically washed away by water. I'll still encourage those who seek salvation to go after my cousin and listen to his teachings. And I shall still challenge those who break our laws where ever I see them and who ever they are.

And I get the strangest feeling that burden is going to get me into trouble one day!

The Samaritan Woman at the Well: Come and See This Man!

John 4: 1-41

You've got to come with me now. You can't miss this opportunity. You've got to meet him for yourself.

No. Let me slow down. You're only getting half the story - if that. Let me just take a few moments to catch my breath. Then it will make more sense. Then it will all fall into place for you. Then you'll understand what it is I'm trying to tell you.

It all started as a normal day when I got up this morning. I had the chores to do, the food to prepare, all the usual sort of thing. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Soon it was noon and I could go out to the well and draw water. There'd be no-one else there then. But there was. And that's where I met him. He asked me to give him a drink of water. He simply just came up to me in my ordinary, everyday, activity and spoke to me.

When I turned to look at him I couldn't believe my eyes. He was a Jew. Can you believe that? One of those ultra clean people asking me a 'filthy Samaritan' for a drink? I suppose I must have realised that my world was about to be turned upside down. No. All I could do was to stand there with the water jar in my hand and stare at him. And all he did was to stare right back at me.

I felt like his eyes were seeing right through me. I felt like he was looking deep into my soul, my very being. I felt that he was

learning everything that there ever was to know about me. In that look he knew me totally and completely.

I didn't know what to say or do. I was rooted to the spot by that look. I guessed he must have sensed it because he spoke to me again. And what he said just didn't make any sense at first. He offered me a drink of water. And he told me that if I was to drink his cup of water I would never thirst again. No matter how hard I tried all I could still do was to look at him standing there with no water jar or even a skin to pour a cup of water out of, let alone no cup itself, and struggle to make sense of the situation.

I knew how sordid and squalid my life was. I knew what I had done and was still doing. I knew the totality of my sinful nature. There was no way I was worthy of taking anything from a man such as him. Not even a cup of water.

But that didn't stop him. He went on speaking to me. As he spoke he told me he knew about all the things that had ever happened to me in my life. He told me about the way I was living and what I was doing. All the time he was listing these sinful acts he went on offering to refresh me. In the end I knew that he knew everything. Suddenly, at the end of this in depth review of my life, it came to me. I knew what he meant about me drinking his water and never being thirsty again.

All my life I'd been searching for something. All my life there had been this big emptiness inside of me. All my life I'd tried to make myself feel that I belonged, was needed and fitted in. All my life I knew it was not working and I was still thirsting for something else. And it was that thirst that he was offering to quench for me - there, then, immediately and forever. That was what changed me, deep down inside. That was what turned my life upside down and my world inside out.

I looked into his eyes again and saw he was watching me closely. He was waiting as this half formed idea worked its way through my mind and came to completeness. He watched as I took his cup and drank deep of his special water. And then I knew too. By knowing him for myself all my searching was over. At that moment I knew what I had to do. Which is why I have come rushing here to tell you that you have got to come and meet this man.

I don't know how long he's going to be at the well but I get the impression that he is a patient man. I don't know if you feel like I did - that you are not worthy of being given such a gift - but I do know that doesn't matter to him. I don't know if you are thirsty like I was but I do know that his water will quench your thirst. All you have to do is come and meet this man.

He's waiting for you - all of you - each one of you - right now - right here in our ordinary, everyday, experiences. All you've got to do is to come and meet him. Let him look deep into your eyes and know everything that you've ever done. Then you'll feel it too. Then you'll be refreshed knowing that it makes no difference to him. He wants to give you his refreshment as a free gift. He wants to bless you with the life long thirst quenching water of his love. He wants to meet you - the real you.

All you have to do is to come. Come and meet this unique and extraordinary man for yourself.

My Brother – He's a Fisherman!

Matthew 4: 18-22; Mark 1: 14-18; Luke 5: 1-11

Who'd have thought it? I ask you. My brother! You know – Simon, big chap, beard, loud mouth? Well, you'll never believe it but he's just gone and done the most remarkable thing. He's chucked it all in. Given it all up. Turned his back on his family and the business. And it's all my fault. If only I'd paid more attention to our boats and the nets none of this would have happened!

You see, being the younger brother, I left everything to do with running the business up to him. After all he always wanted to be the one in charge. He was born for it. Father saw that in him too and I knew that he would take over one day. And that was fine by me as well – because it left me time to do what I wanted to do to.

I used to like chatting to my friends, putting the world to rights – and there's a lot to put right these days! That's how I got us all into this mess. Talking. Trying to sort out life's problems. Mixing with the wrong crowd some would say.

That's how I got mixed up with John. You remember him – came out of the desert, all hairy and wearing skins, telling us that we had to change our ways. Bit scary he was at first but, when you got to know him, his heart was in the right place. And what he said made some sort of sense as well. O.K. You had to have some idea about what the Prophets said that God had promised us, his chosen people. It helped if you knew who the Messiah was that we were all meant to be waiting for to lead us out of oppression. And you had to be prepared to admit that you were in the wrong – that you had sinned, if you like.

That's where the washing clean in the water came in – baptism he called it. Washing ourselves clean in the eyes of God. I know us fishermen are in and out of the water every working day. Well, if you've heard the language on a fishing boat you'd understand why we have to wash our sins away regularly! But it wasn't just the washing. It was the other things he said that attracted me to him. I used to spend all my spare time listening and helping – much to Simon's annoyance.

Then it was only the other day that John sent me and the rest away from him. He said we had to go after this other bloke who he pointed out to us. At first I didn't think I knew him. He looked just as John had looked when he first came out of the desert – all dirty and unkept with a far away look on his tired face. But John was insistent – this was the man who was going to take over teaching us from now on.

I'd heard that same tone in John's voice once before. It was when our uncle had finished teaching us everything he knew about nets and boats and fishes. He said it was time for us to learn from a better teacher and he sent us out onto the sea. He was right. We learnt more from the sea in the first 3 days than we had every learnt from him in the previous 3 years. The sea's a harsh teacher but we managed to survive the lesson. That's how I knew it was time for me to move on to this new teacher that John had shown was to take over from him.

So I went after this new bloke. I caught up with him and told him that John had sent me. He turned and looked at me and I went all weak at the knees. It took me a while to realise that I'd seen him before. He'd been around a few weeks ago – when John was baptising people in the Jordan. John seemed to know him the moment he turned up – as if he was a family friend or something. He'd baptised him himself and as the water flooded over him a strange thing happened. This dove came out of nowhere and settled on him.

Then it was gone – and so was he. We all got on with the task in hand and thought no more about it. Until now when I was looking into his eyes. He seemed to be speaking to me, although he didn't say a word, and I knew I was going to have to go after him from that moment on. Whatever he wanted me to do, wherever he wanted me to go, whoever he wanted me to take him to meet, that was what I wanted to do now.

And I knew the first thing I had to do was to take him to meet Simon. So we set off for the lake and arrived just as Simon was returning from a fruitless trip. There was an exchange of words between my new teacher and Simon and suddenly the nets were bursting at their seams. I suppose that's how he got my brother's attention. He's always anxious to talk with anyone who knows anything useful about fishing.

Talk they did – but not for very long. Because that's how this all happened. We gave up our fishing and our boats and started to follow Joshua wherever he's going to lead us. Simon's even got a new name out of it. We're calling him "Peter the rock" these days - because he is the strongest of us all. He's the natural leader of our group.

And we've all changed. We've all learnt something about ourselves, Joshua and the Kingdom of God. Perhaps Simon Peter has changed the most. He certainly seems to have the most confidence in the Rabbi. I wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't prepared to walk on water for him!

A Man at the Well at the Sheep Gate

John 5: 1-18

I was just sitting there. Feeling really fed up. I couldn't do anything else. I hadn't been able to use my legs for ages. All I could do was to sit. Rejected and neglected. And I wasn't alone. There were lots of us sitting around that pool. All of us were handicapped or infirm in some way. All day long we'd sit there and watch the water as it was stirred by the breeze in the sunlight. I wasn't the only one feeling sorry for myself. We were all fed up. It was as if none of us knew any hope at all.

You see we knew that this was a special pool. Every now and then the surface of the water would be stirred more violently by something other than the breeze - an angel maybe. Then the first one into the water would be cured of whatever it was that afflicted him. For ages we sat waiting for this to happen. And when it did all these hours of inactivity was replaced by frantic, desperate, movement.

But it was no use to me. I was all on my own. Others had friends and relatives prepared to wait with them. It was always one of those who got into the water first. My helpers were long gone - fed up with the waiting. I had given up too. I was never going to get healed. I was going to just sit there until I died.

Little did I know what was going to happen.

One afternoon while I was just staring at the ground, these two feet came to a stop in front of me. I had no idea who they belonged to so I looked up at the face. He had the sun behind him so I couldn't even see that clearly. But I could see clearly enough to know it was no-one I knew.

That didn't stop him from talking to me though. He asked me what was the matter I began to tell him my story. You know, I'd waited so long for someone - anyone - to pay me attention that the words just poured out of me. He asked me that simple question and I was telling him my life story - a sorry tale at that. All he said was "What's the matter?" and he got the lot. I told him how I'd been here forever. I told him how all my friends and family had given up on me. I told him that I had lost all hope.

I knew I was never going to be the first into the waters. All the pain, all the hurt, all the desperation just came out of me in a torrent of words.

Then, in the middle of all that, this stranger asked me another question that stopped me in my tracks. “Do you want to be healed?” That’s all he said. That rocked me back. That stopped me dead, I can tell you. No-one had ever asked me that before. I had to think about that. But then my own desperation got in the way again. Needing to tell someone my situation became my priority once more. And the never ending flood of words began again.

There I sat on my mat in the dust at the feet of this perfect stranger telling him my whole life story. Justifying my every action. Sharing my every unfulfilled hope and dream. I’m surprised he listened at all, let alone waiting as long as he did before he did something. And that’s where he really took me by surprise.

He didn’t just walk away like many others had done. He didn’t offer me a few coins to ease my pain or mutter meaningless words of comfort to show that he cared. He did something that no-one else had ever done. He did something remarkable. He gave me an order.

“Get up. Pick up that mat and walk away from here.” That’s what he said. That’s the instructions he gave me. That’s what I did. In an instant I was suddenly walking down the street away from the pool carrying the sleeping mat that I’d lain on for I don’t know how long.

And that’s when the trouble started.

I hadn’t gone more than a few steps when these two Temple Guards jumped on me. They wanted to know what I was doing. I told them I was carrying my sleeping mat. The next thing I knew that had become a capital offence - because I was doing it on the Sabbath. I tried to explain that I’d been sick and lost all track of the days of the week - I wasn’t even sure what month it was - but it was no use. They were going to drag me off and see I got a good stoning.

I found myself babbling again - saying anything I could think off to avoid the punishment. I guess I must have told them that someone had told me to do it because that stopped them in their tracks. Right there in the middle of the street they wanted to know who it was. They could smell the blood of a bigger prey here and they wanted me to point them at it. But I didn’t know him. I’d never seen him before in my life. Try as I might, no matter how hard I looked around in the street, I couldn’t see him anywhere now.

Nevertheless it was enough to get me off the hook. They took my vague description, dropped me in the dust and were off like a pair of jackals searching for their latest kill. I felt sorry for him. He’d done me no harm - quite the opposite in fact. He had changed my life forever. He had lifted me out of my suffering and given me a new life. And all I could do in return was to betray him.

But there was nothing else I could do, was there? I had to look after number one, didn’t I?

Letter From a Tribune to the Prefect of Judea

Matthew 8: 5-13; Luke 7: 1-10

Sir,

As instructed I have investigated the matter of fraternisation as was reported to me and herewith provide my full and complete report.

Centurion Maximus freely admits that he did seek aid and comfort from a member of the local population which is contrary to the rules of occupation as laid down in general by the Senate and in particular by yourself with regard to this land. He cites in his defence that it often falls to an officer in the Imperial Army to take desperate measures to ensure the safety and well being of the men under his command.

I am sure that you will feel, as I did, that these bare facts warranted further and fuller investigation which explains the delay in the completion of this report. By your leave, I will here present those further facts.

The member of the indigenous population central to this matter is no ordinary man. At first sight he appears to be a tradesman from a small and insignificant collection of hovels that these people call their homes near to Tiberias. However, he has already shown an in depth knowledge of the religious teachings of these people and assembled quite a following. He is well respected by the rabble who sometimes flock to hear him in their thousands.

Sir, you will recall that a similar movement grew up around a man called John. His particular talent seemed to be the use of water to wash people - I believe they referred to it as “baptism”. It was said by John and his followers that this process made

“new” those who underwent it. I can assure you from personal observation that they looked, acted and even smelt the same. However, John did inspire many people and there is anecdotal evidence that this new leader of the rabble was at one time associated with John.

You will further recall that it did not take too much effort for us to make use of our puppet king in the region to see that this John was imprisoned. That reduced his effectiveness considerably and removed him from the public eye. While his subsequent execution - seemingly on a whim - was unfortunate and I feel unnecessary, it had little or no impact on the many who previously had followed him.

However the influence of this new “teacher” - as they call him - far exceeds that of John. I believe his given name is Joshua but those who are associated with him call him Jesus. It seems that his particular talent is to offer people healing. There are many accounts passing across my desk each week speaking of how blind men can now see, the lame can now walk and those who once were possessed by evil spirits no longer suffer under that curse. Each account speaks of Jesus’s direct involvement in these healings. For myself I have no direct evidence to offer in support or denial of these accounts. However, this alleged ability to heal drew the Centurion into contact with the native.

It appears that Maximus still has in his service the same slave who was responsible for his childhood training at arms. Over the years Maximus has built up a relationship with that slave that borders on friendship. All of us who are heavily weighed with the task of leadership know how important it is to have a companion in whom we may confide our doubts. This is part of the process in weighing the options before us, making our most painful decisions. It seems that this slave, lowly as he is, has become Maximus’s confidante.

At the time of the fraternisation Maximus has informed us that this slave lay sick - seemingly approaching death. Unusual as it was, Maximus had arranged for the best of medical care that we could offer to be visited upon this slave. It appeared to be having no effect. Each day the slave grew weaker. Maximus was desperate to save his life. In my opinion, this is where he made a simple error of judgement.

He travelled to where the company of Jesus were meeting and sought the aid of that alleged healer. In his defence it must be noted that he travelled out of uniform and without any trappings of his rank. Neither did he encourage or permit Jesus to enter any barracks or other building in use by the Roman Army. Maximus reports that, as he always has to follow orders without question even when issued from as far away as Rome itself, all that he asked this Jesus to do was to issue the order for the man to be well. Maximus would carry that order back to his slave and that would be the end of the matter.

I believe it would have been the end of the matter had not the slave got better. Even as I write this he is still alive and showing no sign of his recent approach to death’s door. Of course, we are confident that it was as a result of the earlier work of our physicians - as are they. But there is much talk amongst the other slaves and even some of the lower ranks that it was this Jesus simply speaking the word that brought about the cure. Maximus assures me that he has no opinion on this. All that he knows is that his servant was once dying and now he lives.

It is my judgement, with which I humbly hope you will concur, that Centurion Maximus is guilty only of an error of judgement brought about by the emotional attachment to the slave in question. He did not act in order to offer any aid or comfort to any of the local population, only in the interests of someone who he loved. He freely acknowledges that he has risked everything by acting in this way and is willing to take the consequences.

He is clearly now not suitable for front line work amongst the natives. Everyone will know of his approach to this healer and this will undermine his authority on the streets. I recommend that he be restricted to barrack duties. Perhaps if he was given tasks that would make him hated by the population - the execution of any rebels against our Roman law for example - this would have the necessary counterbalancing effect to his current popularity.

I believe that we must also watch closely the activities of this self-styled healer Jesus. If things go on as they are, he may become a leader amongst the rabble. I have already taken the necessary action amongst our contacts within their religious orders to try to discredit him. However, before things come to a head, it may be necessary to enlist the aid of our puppet King once more. I look to your worship’s assistance in this aspect of this affair. After all, we made sure John was imprisoned and that worked to our advantage. Surely we can manoeuvre a similar fate for this Jesus?

Assuring your worship of my continued loyal and faithful service,

Asking the gods to continue to smile and shed their benevolence upon you and all of your household,

Steadfast in the service of the Senate and People of Rome,

I remain,

Flavius
Tribune of the Legion currently in Judea.

Letter From a Physician

Matthew 9: 18-26; Mark 5: 21-42; Luke 8: 40-56

My dear Theophilus,

I know that this letter may come as a surprise to you as it is now some years since we studied the healing arts together. I know that we swore we would keep in touch. I believe we both hoped that it would be more than the occasional note to report yet another change of location as the Lord led us to fresh challenges. But I have just witnessed the most remarkable series of events and something is driving me to tell you about them.

Let me start at the beginning.

As you know I have now settled in Capernaum where I make an adequate living looking to the needs of the good people of this town. They are a mixed crowd but many are faithful to the laws and the prophets teaching so I want for nothing. As the people have come to know me, they have come to accept the limitations of our craft. They rejoice in the triumphs of my successes and share in the grief of my failures.

So it was a few months ago when one prominent member of this community - one Jairus - brought his young daughter to me. She had not been well for some time and did not seem to be growing like the other children of her age. I examined her but could find no underlying cause for this. I prescribed some tonics and recommended rest, hoping the malady would pass in its own time. But it was not to be.

Jairus and his daughter regularly returned to see me. Each time the little girl was a little weaker. And still I could not discern the causing of this illness. Despite calling upon the whole range of remedies that we both know about, there seemed to be nothing I could do. I began to dread their visits.

They would arrive at my consulting rooms about once a week. The little girl always a little more drawn and tired but still smiling for all that. She looked at the world as if she was seeing it for the first time and always had a tale to tell of some new discovery she had made in the market place or garden. She embraced me as a friend and my heart was warmed by her affection. Jairus, however, presented a different picture. Outwardly he was still friendly and greeted me as the friend I had become. He, too, was ready to share in the talk of the town before the consultation began in earnest. But when I looked into those eyes of his, I could see that all was not well.

He was a desperate man. His daughter was obviously very important to him and he was terrified that he was going to lose her. He saw me as his only hope. While he never blamed me for not being able to help by reversing the progressive weakness, his eyes begged me to come up with a new course of treatment. I could tell that he was looking for a miracle.

Try as I might I could not bring that about. I sent messages to all the other healers in the area, seeking their advice. Rare and peculiar ingredients were obtained for the latest in a long line of potions and tonics to try on Jairus's daughter. But none of them worked. And we both knew - Jairus and I - that one day the time was going to come when I had to admit there was nothing else I could do.

That dark day came only a few days ago. I was in the middle of my morning consultations when word came from Jairus that I was needed immediately at his house. I dropped everything and rushed there. I found his daughter was barely awake. The end was very close and she was fading fast. Saddened at my failure to help my friend, I began to prepare him for the inevitable. But he was having none of it.

In his desperation he began to rant and rave. He was talking about some faith healer who has recently begun to work in the region. You know how these charlatans spring up from time to time and swindle the common people out of money in exchange for medicines that do no good at all. I told Jairus this and that he would be wasting his time - perhaps the only remaining time he had to be with his daughter.

But he would have none of it. He told me that he knew a man who had heard from another that a man blind from birth had been given the gift of sight by this healer. And another man had told of the healing of a whole group of lepers by the same man. I tried to explain how desperate people will cling to any rumour in their need. He responded that was exactly where he was at that moment before running from the house in a desperate search for this man.

There was nothing more I could do. I just stood there and watched as the little girl got weaker and weaker. Once, towards the end, she opened her eyes and weakly called for her father. But he was not there. It was only me who watched as she breathed her last and died. It broke my heart and for a few moments I just cried and cried as I looked at the still, lifeless, body before me. Then I remembered her father and his desperate quest. Healer or not, it was too late now. He had to know that his daughter was dead so I sent one of the servants to find him and give him the news.

Imagine my surprise when not ten minutes later he returned to the house with the faith healer. I thought that the servant had not found him, but Jairus and the other man assured me that they knew the young girl was dead. At this point I expected the faith healer - this Jesus - to make his excuses and leave. But no. He ordered everyone out of the bedroom where the dead body lay and began to perform some sort of ritual over it. The noise of the women weeping was distracting him and he demanded quiet as he worked.

From where I stood I couldn't see clearly what he did. But I did hear him tell the girl to get up. And that is just what she did. It was as if she had woken up from a deep sleep but I know she was dead. Jesus could see that we didn't believe what we were seeing and ordered food to be brought. While we watched she ate something. She was not only alive but more alive than I had seen her for years. And with that he was gone. No demand for money, or anything else. He simply walked away out into the street again. The only thing he asked was that we were not to tell anyone what had happened.

I tell you, my friend, as I write this down I'm beginning to disbelieve my own senses. It all sounds too far fetched - just another rumour of hope for desperate people. But I know what I saw. That little girl was dead and now she is alive again. And she is full of the vitality and the energy that was missing in her. The only explanation that I can find is that this Jesus did something to provide Jairus with the miracle that he needed.

But, of course, that is not a rational explanation. There must be something deeper behind all these events. I need to try and get to the bottom of this. The only way I can think of achieving this is to find out all I can about this Jesus and the things that it is alleged that he has done. So if you hear that I have shut up my practice and left town, you will know why.

I will write again as soon as I can with all the news that I can find out. When I discover what the secret is of the miracles that this Jesus seems to be working, I will let you know. Imagine finding a way to conquer even death! That would certainly be good news that we would have to share with others!

Yours in friendship,
Luke.

An Innkeeper Tells a Tall Tale

Luke 10: 25-37

Yes, that's a good one. But you're not the only one with a funny story, I can tell you. Why, only the other day I heard one that's going around all over the place at the moment. Come here, let me tell you.

You see there's this innkeeper up Jericho way and he had the most extraordinary experience the other day. This guy brought this other guy in hung across the back of his donkey. The second guy was really in a bad way. Not only had he been robbed - common enough in that part of the world - but, because he hadn't had a lot on him, the thieving thugs had given him a right going over. When they'd had their fun they'd even taken the clothes off his back and left him for dead at the side of the road.

You might think that as the road was quite busy that he'd soon been seen and given a helping hand by another passer by. But the bloke whose donkey it was told a different tale. By the time he arrived on the scene - and that was a couple of hours later mark you - lots of people had seen the body lying there at the side of the road. But none of them had stopped. They just kept their distance and went on about their business as fast as they could.

If you think the one who had offered the helping hand was making that bit up so as to set his actions in an even better light, the one who had been beaten up confirmed it - or at least so the story goes. I've heard that he remembered seeing all sorts of folk who you'd normally expect to get in there and help - you know those snobs from the synagogues and the Temple - with all their learning and teaching and preaching. They simply walked on by. They didn't want to know, they didn't want to get involved, they didn't want to burden themselves with another's problem - when they weren't in the public eye. All he could do was to lie there, getting weaker by the minute, and watch the day move towards sunset. He knew then it would be all over for him - the jackals would come out of the hills and have him for their supper.

So, I suppose that makes the donkey man some sort of hero - but that's not the whole of the story. Once he'd bound up the cuts and scrapes on this man who'd been mugged, he even handed over his own cloak to keep him warm while they made their way to the nearest inn. And it didn't stop there. My innkeeper mate swears that this helping hand insisted on paying for everything - not only that night and the next morning but leaving more cash so that his new found friend could take a bit of time to get back on his feet. He even promised to call in on his way back to pay for anything extra that the cash wouldn't cover.

Generous or what? I bet you can't believe it, can you? I can't. And do you know what? There's more. My mate told me about the one with the donkey. He was a Samaritan! Can you believe that? One of those lousy, stinking, low life, degrading themselves by helping one of us? No, it's never going to happen. That sort of thing only ever happens in stories.

Hey! Maybe that's what it is. Maybe it's just a story. I bet my mates heard someone telling this story - one of those wandering mystics that you find up that way towards Jerusalem - and he's decided that it's such a good yarn, he'd work himself into it.

Well, it is a good yarn. Everyone likes to think that they'd help someone in a time of need - and to pep it up a bit with the high and mighty simply walking by a chance to do some good makes it even better. And I suppose someone different has to be the one that stops to offer the help. It makes a good story if that someone stands out from the others as well. Perhaps even something unpleasant about him.

But a Samaritan? Who's going to believe that? When would one of those ever put themselves out for one of us? Come to think of it, when would one of us ever put ourselves out for of them? That's as likely as That's as likely as me giving away free beer all night!

And I know what you're thinking. The world would be a better place if that did come to pass - free beer or no free beer!

Lazarus At a Feast in Bethany

Lazarus Moans About His Sisters

Luke 10: 38-41

I don't believe! It was meant to be a special gathering for our guest. I'd asked the girls to lay on food and make sure everything ran smoothly so we could all hear what he had to say to us. And then, right in the middle of it, they had this almighty fight!

There we all were, as we always do at meal time, putting the world to rights, discussing what the law and the prophets said about this, that and everything. You know the sort of thing - just what men have done since the beginning of time. And our chief guest - you know my friend Joshua - was giving us his fresh insights to guide our thoughts along new lines, helping us to see the world the way he saw it. And his way was making sense!

Sitting there I knew he was challenging the traditional views I'd held for all my life. I knew he was proposing a new way of thinking, living, acting. It seemed revolutionary. It was earth shattering in its vision. But it all made sense.

I must have let my attention wander as I sat there. I must have been lost in thinking about what I just heard. And then, all of a sudden, I was pulled back to the reality of the dinner party as all hell broke loose!

If I've got it right Mary had just given him a plate of some special nibbles she had prepared for him. Then she settled down to listen to what we men were talking about. She could see that he was content to simply sit, chat and nibble for a time. But that wasn't good enough for Martha.

I don't know if she was jealous. I don't know if it was because she was tired. I don't even know if she was trying too hard to please. But I do know she lost it and started having a go at Mary.

You see Martha had been in the kitchens all day. She has always been the better cook. I think she'd even baked those special delicacies that Mary had given to our guest of honour. And I guess she wanted to be the perfect hostess. She wanted the guests to know that her sister and her - as well as all the rest of the people - had taken extra special care in the preparation of the feast.

So, there she was, offering plate after plate of food to the guests as they were relaxing between courses. She was trying to tempt them to try this special dish or something off that plate. But no-one was really paying her any attention. Everyone was happy with what they'd got and they were listening to the conversation.

That wasn't good enough for Martha. No matter how hard she tried she wasn't being noticed. All her hard work was being just taken for granted. I guess she could see Mary just sitting there. All she'd done is to give out one plate and now she was lounging about as if all the hard work was over. So I guess that's why she started to have a go at her sister.

She started calling her names, telling her she was lazy, ordering her to get up and do what she was doing. She wanted Mary to make sure that their guests had everything they needed. In her anger, in her fatigue, in her desire to please, she couldn't see that Mary had met the guest's needs with that simple act of giving him one special plate off which he could eat while everyone talked about the ways of the world.

I began to think they were going to start throwing things at one another. I thought it was going to come to blows! They were at it like two cats fighting over the choice tit bit of kitchen scrap. It was going to get really rough and bring no credit at all onto our household. And then Joshua intervened. He didn't raise his voice, he didn't show any anger or frustration. He was just there in a relaxed state and in his quiet, gentle, way he acted to calm the situation.

He pointed out that Mary had made the better choice. Not only had she seen to the immediate needs of the guests, she was listening quietly to what was going on so as to be ready to meet any future needs. Sometimes we all mistake activity for action.

We have to be doing rather than waiting.

I'm not sure if it made much sense to Martha – she was quite badly worked up – but it did defuse the immediate situation. She just stood there for a moment digesting what she had heard. Then she, too, sat down. I could see her trying to absorb the new, revolutionary, way of thinking that had been suggested to her as well. So everyone calmed down and we all settled back into the discussion.

I don't think that's the end of it though. We all had a lot to think about after that meal. And I just sense that it's all going to end in tears for those two sisters one day. And I can't help feeling that our guest of honour is going to be mixed up in it as well. Ah well, only time will tell.

A Steward at the Prodigal's House **Luke 15: 11-32**

If it please you, young master, I must talk with you. I know you are upset and you want no part of what's happening inside, but I have my duties to perform. It is an obligation that I must fulfil. Please listen to me. Your father has sent me to ask you to come inside. He wants you to come and join the party. He wants you to be part of the welcome feast for your younger brother.

He has asked me to tell you that he fully understands your position. While he cannot completely know what you are feeling, he has some idea. You're upset. You're hurt. All this is painful for you. In fact you're quite racked off with the situation. I know I would be if I were you. After all, what's your little brother done?

I was there those few months back when he came to your father and asked for – demanded more like – his share of everything in cash so that he could leave this estate and make his fortune in the wide world. I listened while your father did everything in his power to make him give up his foolish scheme. He knew that it was all going to end in tears but there was nothing that he could do. Your brother was determined to go his own way.

You'll remember it was me in the end who helped him pack the few belongings that he wanted to take with him. And I remember that I stood alongside your father as he watched his younger son disappear into the heat haze along that dusty road.

And I've been here for you while your brother's been off doing his thing. I've watched each day as you've tried to take up the slack and make up for his absence. I've waited for you each evening when you've come back from the fields with warm water to wash yourself in and clean clothes to dress yourself in while you tried to snatch a few hours rest before the sun rose again and you drove yourself out onto the farm and its flocks.

And I've been with your father. I don't think a day has passed when he hasn't spoken to me about your brother and what he did. We'd be standing in the same place, looking into the heat haze and he'd speak to me about his upset, his hurt and his pain. I guess I'm the only one that he can talk to these days – with your brother gone and you working so hard to try and make up for his absence. He had lost you both.

And then today, when we were once more standing looking down that long dusty road, I saw a figure coming towards us. Long before I recognised him your father knew it was your brother. He ran to meet him and enfold him in his arms. I know your brother was trying to talk to your father about what had happened, how he had lost everything and why he had had to come home, but your father was having none of it. All he knew was that he had found something that he believed was lost forever and it was so very, very, precious to him.

I believe that's why he showered him with all those gifts. I believe that's why he ordered me to see that the fatted calf was killed and cooked as the centrepiece of the special feast that's been prepared. I believe that's why he wants you to come and share his joy. That's why he's sent me on this fool's errand.

Don't get me wrong. I don't think there's any way that me, a servant in this household, can persuade you to do something that the master has already failed to get you to do. He did ask you to come to the feast, didn't he? And you said no to him. So there's no way that you're going to say yes to me is there? After all, I'm nothing to you. So you've got to ask yourself why am I doing this? Why didn't I simply go through the motions and accept your rejection of the invitation as irrevocable and final.

I'm doing this because the master loves me. He shows me that he loves me by the way he treats me – by talking to me about how he is feeling, asking me how I am feeling and being there for me. That's why he's having this party. Because despite all the upset, all the pain, all the sense of great loss, that which he thought was gone forever has come home. And he loves him. And he wants to show him that love – whatever the cost. And he loves you to. That's why he sent me. That's why I came. Out of love and not duty.

So, for the sake of that father's love, won't you please come into the party?

Lazarus After the Tomb

John 11: 1-44

It was just like falling asleep.

I wanted to get that out of the way first. It's what everyone wants to know. What was it like? What did it feel like? How was it to die? And that's the best I can do. It was just like falling asleep.

Of course, I didn't know that was what was happening. I didn't know that day was going to be any different from any other. I didn't know that it was meant to be my last day on earth. No one can ever know that, can they? For me it was just another ordinary day – with an extraordinary event to follow.

I'd been working for most of it. You know how it is when the household is busy everyone pitches in. Sunset was coming on and I was thinking about the evening meal. I wanted to see that my sisters had got the kitchen under control and that everyone was going to have a good meal at the end of a long day's work. So I went to see how they were doing.

I thought it was the heat from the ovens because that's when I came over all faint. My legs gave way underneath me and I was having problems getting my breath. Suddenly I couldn't stand up anymore and sank to my knees. That's when the servants saw what was happening. That's when they rushed over to me and helped me – almost carried me really – to the couch in the main room, away from the heat of the kitchen. I must have stayed on that couch for at least a couple of days. I remember being brought food that I couldn't eat. I remember having water being offered to my lips. I remember Mary and Martha hovering over me and looking very worried. The last thing I remember was looking into Mary's eyes and that's when I think I said: "Don't worry. I'll be alright". Then closed my eyes. And that's when I must have died.

And then? Nothing really. That just about sums it all up. I felt like I was surrounded by nothing. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't hear anything. I couldn't feel anything. It was as if I was totally isolated from everything. Cut off from all that I once held dear. Set apart from those I loved and the world as I knew it. As I tell you this now I get the feeling that this separation should have been very frightening. It sounds the most horrific of situations. But then it was as if I was cut off from even having that sort of emotion. In fact I couldn't feel anything, think about anything. My mind was frozen. It – and I – were simply just there amid the darkness of nowhere, no when, nothing.

I don't know how long that went on. How could I? Time had lost all meaning for me. It was as if everything had been put on hold and I was going to be stuck in that limbo forever. But even that thought, that concept, had been taken from me. I was when and where I was and that was all. But then it happened.

I heard someone calling my name. And I responded. I went to that place where the person was calling me to. Then, even though I was still swathed in darkness, there was feeling. There was sensation. Time had begun to run again. I tried to look around me but this time my eyes were blinded by the lack of light. I was in a cold, dark, damp, place and I knew I was very much alone.

I did what I could to explore my situation. I found I could move my head and feel something hard beneath me. Little by little understanding came as I discovered I was lying on a shelf of rock. I tried to move my arms but they were bound tightly to my sides. As I wondered about this I became aware of the smell of rich ointment filling my nostrils. That gave me the answer my racing mind had been seeking.

Where was I? I was in my tomb. I had been wrapped in grave cloths, anointed with the ointments for the dead and sealed away from the light and life of the world until the last days came upon us. So, that's where and when I was – or so I thought. And then the voice called my name again. And suddenly there was a blinding light driving away the darkness in which I lay.

Now I could see that my supposition was right. I was in a tomb and I wasn't alone. I'd been laid to rest amongst the bodies of my ancestors. That made it clear to me that I hadn't fallen asleep. I had died. But I still didn't know what was happening to me now. And I didn't know who was calling my name.

The voice came again while I was taking all this in. "Lazarus, come forth," it commanded. It carried such power, such authority that before I knew it I was forcing myself to my feet and starting to shamle out of the tomb. I emerged from the darkness into the light still wrapped in the grave clothes. Nothing had prepared me for the sight that lay before me.

There was a large crowd gathered. I knew most of them for they were my household. My sisters stood in the front. They didn't know whether laugh or to cry. Their faces carried a look that somehow mixed joy and fear together. Martha was crying and fell to her knees as I came out into the sunlight. Others also showed the signs of these mixed emotions.

I looked from face to face, seeking out the one who had called me. And there he was standing at the very centre of his followers. I knew who it was before I met his eyes. I don't know if some small part of my mind had recognised his voice or whether I expected him to be there. But there he was – Joshua bar Joseph, the rabbi and my friend. It was he who had called

me back from the dead. It was he who was the first to come forward and embrace me.

Later that same day, after all the hullabaloo had finished, he and I sat quietly and watched the sun go down. It felt great. I guess you have to be dead to truly appreciate what it is to be alive at times, especially if you lead lives made busy with unimportant things. In the gathering evening light he talked to me about what had happened. He put it all into context for me. Made me realise what he had done – and why he had done it.

He also said he'd do it again next time. You see he explained to me that I would die again for that is the fate of all humankind. I would once more go into that darkness of nothing, nowhere, no time. But he would be there again to call me out of that darkness into his light. And at that time the light would last forever because I would be with him in his father's house. Then there will be no pain, no suffering and we will rejoice and be happy together for all eternity.

He also explained why he was going to do this.

It was all because he loves me.

The Thankful Leper

Luke 17: 11-19

My life changed forever when he spoke to me. Don't get me wrong. I knew who he was – everyone knows him – even you. And he had already touched me, But it was when he spoke to me that my life changed.

I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me try and put this into some sort of order. Let me try and start at the beginning.

The beginning? I don't remember that far back. All my adult life I'd not been a part of society. I'd been cast out, set apart. I was unclean, diseased, something to be feared. So in their wisdom and in their ignorance society had set me apart.

And I wasn't alone. That day there were ten of us making our way along that road. All we were trying to do was to find somewhere where we would be accepted for what we were – and be supported in our infirmity. That's when I met him. I didn't go looking for him, I just stumbled across him as we both went our separate ways along the road.

He saw me. He saw my need. He knew what had to happen to change my life. And he reached out and turned my life upside down. He took away my infirmity and prepared me to live my life as an ordinary, clean, accepted member of society. Me and all those like me on the road. He reached out to touch and change all our lives forever.

And then he went on his way and we on ours. Oh yes, we were suddenly much happier than we had been a few moments earlier. We were all laughing and some were even singing. Most of us hadn't had cause to do that for many a year. It felt great! But suddenly a feeling came over me. I wanted to ask him why he'd done it. I wanted to know why he had treated me differently from all the others who claimed they wanted to help me. So I turned back and went after him. To ask him what I wanted to know.

It didn't take me long to catch up with him. He hadn't gone very far at all. When I got to him I was suddenly tongue tied – afraid maybe that I'd make him angry. Then I looked into his face and knew that he would never be angry with me. His gentleness overwhelmed me and I fell to my knees at his feet.

Once more he reached out to me. He put his hands down and lifted my head so that my eyes not looking into the dust and dirt of this world. Instead I was looking upwards. Once more I was looking into his face. Then I knew all the answers to the 'why' question that had been so important a few seconds earlier.

I had to say something. He was waiting for me, waiting to see why I had come after him. And I said the only thing that I could think of at the time. I said the only thing that I knew he wanted to hear. I said "Thank you". And he smiled on me.

That's when it happened. That's when he spoke to me. That's when he changed my life. And all he said was "Your faith has made you free".

I suppose now – in the mundane moments that I am living in following that remarkable conversation on the road – that doesn't make much sense. My faith. My faith in what? My faith in the arrogance and greed of a society that casts out anyone who is different or out of the ordinary? My faith in man's inhumanity to man in pursuit of the unattainable? My faith that the sun will rise tomorrow and the rain will once more fall and I'll get wet? It would be easy to be lost trying to work out what he meant.

But on that road, when I knelt in the dust and looked up into those caring, compassionate, loving eyes, I knew what he meant. I knew what I'd put my faith in. I'd placed my life and everything about it into his hands. I was, and still am, confident that he will never let me down.

I don't have all the answers to the problems of the world – all the greed, and the hurt and the pain and all the rest. I don't even really have the answer to that question I was going to ask him on that road – why had he reached out to help and heal me. But I know where my faith is now rooted. It is founded on the healing hands of that man who still reaches out to touch individuals with the love and compassion he has for everyone.

And he still talks to people. And he still changes people's lives. And that is something that we ought to say "Thank You" for, isn't it?

A Corrupt Judge's Considered Judgement

Luke 18: 1-8

What a day I've just had! And all over just one old woman. Don't get me wrong. I knew it was coming. It's nothing new. It's been going on for ages.

You see it all began the other week - just after the feast day. There I was - just a normal day of fixing this and that for my special and generous friends - and, all of a sudden, there she was. This troublemaker just turned up at my table. At first I didn't see anything special about her. From the way she dressed I could tell she was a widow but there was nothing remarkable about her. Just another old woman.

She must have stood patiently in line for ages in that hot sun, waiting her turn to present her case for judgement. Little did she know that she had no hope of getting that at my table! As if standing in line was all it took to get my attention!! But somehow she got to the front and placed her petition papers on the table.

I bent down and looked through them - as if I was giving the case my full consideration. Actually I was looking for the money that I customarily expected if I was going to handle a case. It wasn't there so I was about to hand the papers back and explain when I looked up into her eyes.

All thoughts of asking for the cash went clean out of my head. Her eyes had a sort of determined look that showed what she wanted was important to her. Very important. That's what stopped me saying anything for a moment. That moment stretched. The longer I took to say something, the more expectant the look in her eyes became: I was going to sort matters out for her. She had no idea what I was thinking and what I wanted off her.

I realised that there was no way I could ask for the money from someone as patient, determined and expectant as she was. The only course of action I could come up with was to dismiss the matter completely. But still I couldn't say anything. In the end all that I could do was to push the papers back across the table and mutter something about being "too busy" and tell her to come back the next day.

I never thought she would. But, the next morning, there she was again. Patiently waiting her turn in the line that forms every morning in the hot sun and still wearing her widow's weeds. No matter how long I tried to stretch out the things people wanted me to sort, in the end she got to the front of that line. Once more those same papers were on the table before me. There was still no cash to be seen but she still had that same look in her eyes. No matter how hard I tried I still couldn't just dismiss the matter out of hand. All I could do was to send her away with another "Come back tomorrow". I hoped this time she would take the hint and get the message.

But she didn't. Nor the next day. Or the day after that. She just kept persistently coming back. When the Sabbath came along I spent the whole time hoping and praying that in the new week someone else would be burdened with her requests. But no. I turn up in my usual place on the first day of the new week and who's standing in line? It's that blessed widow woman again! We started the whole cycle all over again!

But today, after what must be 9 or 10 days, she finally wore me down. I just gave in. I looked through the papers properly this time, gave my judgement and granted her the widow's rights. And I didn't even take a single Shekel for it. Hearing a case without a fee - I'll be ruined if others hear about this. My reputation will be in tatters!

Not to mention all the others who will jump on her bandwagon. I couldn't cope if crowds of people just turned up day after day with their petitions and requests for this and that expecting them to be dealt with for free. I wouldn't be able to get any real work - paid work - done. A load of persistent and regular requests would simply overwhelm me.

Nobody could cope with that sort of load - except the Lord God Almighty. He's the only one who could respond to repeated and endless requests. He could deal with everything that everyone might ask for - especially if they kept at it ceaselessly day in and day out.

But then he's different from me. He wants to help his people. I suppose they know that as well. That's why they petition him all the time with their problems. They regularly and persistently lay their concerns at the feet of their God. Then they go on living for him day after day believing in faith he will answer them. As they wait for God's reply they grow in faith and hope.

You know if I, an unjust and corrupt judge, am forced to respond to the constant pressure of that widow woman who I didn't want to help, how much more will the great and loving God respond to the pleas of his people who he longs to help? If we believe he loves us, we can trust that he will hear our prayers, our cries for help and do something about them. Now that's something we all have to think about!

Money Can Buy You Everything!

Matthew 19: 16-30; Mark 10: 17-31; Luke 18: 18-30

Give it all away?! Give it all away?! Just who does he think he is telling me to give it all away? Doesn't he realise how important my wealth is? Doesn't he realise how long it took for my family to accumulate all that I have? Doesn't he realise the good that I can do with it all?

And it's not mine either. I only hold in trust for others who depend on me. Sure, I have a fine house with lots of rich furnishings and I live a comfortable life. But that's only to be expected. When you're the head of a family that has been established as long as mine you're bound to collect all sorts of fine things around you. And I look after the servants and slaves. They may not live as well as I do but they are much better off than some I could show you. My wealth enables me to treat them well.

And I have my position to maintain. People look to me for leadership. They come seeking my advice and guidance – and not just in matters of business. I may be young but the wealth I have means they respect me. There is always someone wanting to call upon me to hear my views on their latest proposition. It's as if they hope some of my money will rub off on them. Not that I keep it just for myself.

I pay all my tithes and make regular offerings as are required by the Law. It is only proper, given the status I hold at the Synagogue. I know some people say that I've only risen to that position because of my wealth but I don't believe that. To those who are given much, much is expected from them. It is my duty to preserve my position inside the religious and the business worlds in which I move.

It's not that there is anything intrinsically evil about money. Otherwise why would everyone be clamouring for it? Every day there are beggars and vagabonds at my gates asking for anything they can get. I set my slaves on them, I can tell you. I've no time for slackers or time wasters. They should find themselves some honest work and stop sponging off the backs of others.

And it is to these very people he is telling me that I should give all my wealth! They wouldn't know what to do with it. They'd waste it in no time and then they'd be back where they started and I'd have nothing left.

I need my money. I'm using it for good. I've given to every good cause that I think is worthy of my patronage. My benevolence has been acknowledged time and time again. There's even talk of some sort of memorial to me so that my name will live on after I've died.

Yes, money can buy you anything – even immortality. That's why it is so important. That's why everyone wants it. So why does he insist that if I'm to truly follow him I have to give it all away. Doesn't he realise that there's nothing that money can't buy for you? Or am I missing something here?

Bartimaeus No Longer Blind

Matthew 20: 29-34; Mark 10: 46-52; Luke 18: 35-43

Have you ever looked at the sun through a leaf? You can see all the veins that give it structure and nurture it. Have you ever watched the wind stir a field of ripe corn and thought how like the sea it looks? Have you ever looked at your hand and marvelled at the pattern of the lines, ridges and dips that cover them? Have you ever looked into someone's eyes and known the love they have for you?

I hadn't. I knew what a leaf felt like – soft and fresh in spring and summer, crisp and dry in the autumn. I knew what the sun felt like when it shone warm on my face. I could feel the wind too as it touched my cheeks as a gentle breeze or battered me with the strong gusts of an approaching storm. I have felt corn in the fields and known the touch of the hands of a lover. But I'd never seen these things. Not until a few days ago.

You see I'd been blind for many years. I struggled at times to find my way in a world I could not see. I depended on the help of others to carry out the most routine of acts. But I was blessed with many friends who did that – and more – for me. They saw that I had food and water. They made sure they included me in everything, even when I must have been a burden to them. That's why all this came to happen.

You see they had taken me to the shade just outside the city walls because they had heard that this new prophet – you know, the one they call the Son of David – was coming to town. They were curious and wanted to see him for themselves. So they took me along with them so that I might feel included in the excursion. So there I sat as they stood and waited by the roadside.

Then even I knew he was coming. The idle chit chat had tailed off and there was an expectant feeling in the air. I could sense he was getting closer and the crowd were looking at him with a mixture of curiosity to see what he was like and expectation for what he was going to do next. Of course, this was all wasted on me. All I knew was that the atmosphere had changed. It felt like something extraordinary was going to happen but I was going to be excluded from it. All I could do was to sit there, waiting, holding my breath, to hear what I could.

Then I heard a voice. "Do it," it said. I didn't understand it at first. Who was talking to me? Do what? I was confused. But then, through my confusion there came clarity. I suddenly knew what I had to do and moments later I was shouting out loud. I'm not sure what I was shouting but my friends were upset. They didn't want me bringing attention to myself. They didn't want me showing them up. After all they had brought me to this spot and anything I did out of the ordinary would reflect badly on them.

Despite all their efforts to shut me up I went on shouting. Something deep inside was telling me that this was one of those unique moments that would change my life forever. I seem to remember that all I was asking for was for the prophet to take pity on me. I didn't demand that he did anything else – just acknowledge my presence and recognise my infirmity. I do know that it was not going down too well with the crowd. I was spoiling their afternoon's entertainment.

He had an entirely different reaction. He called me to him. Much to the shame and embarrassment of my friends he asked them to bring me right up to him. I can remember the feel of his breath on my face as he looked closely at me. I could smell the sweat and dust on him and his clothes – he must have been walking for ages to be that dirty. I recall the touch of his hands on my face close to my eyes.

I'm not sure what he did next but it seemed that in no time at all I was looking at his face – straight into a pair of eyes that were filled with love for me. Then he was gone. After all those years of darkness I was blinking in the day light as I tried to remember the features of the one who had healed me. But he was off. He was striding down the road with his immediate followers close behind him like a man on a mission.

I followed him into the town. I listened to him as he spoke and taught about the Kingdom of God. I watched as he moved amongst the people and helped them with every touch. I knew that I had found a true friend in Jesus.

Don't get me wrong. My other friends had done everything that they could to help me. They had taken me as far as they could. Yet that day outside the city walls I had to take the next step for myself. I know they had tried to stop me - whether out of embarrassment or concern – but I had to go forward. I was driven by something deep inside me. I had a need to be met and only Jesus could meet it.

You've probably been able to see things all your life. Leaves, cornfields, hands are more likely common place objects that you observe almost every day. But do you really look at them? Do you really look at yourself and your own needs? Have you ever listened to a small voice inside you urging you to "Do it"?

If you do you might be surprised to end up looking into the face of the one who loves you and can meet all your needs.

Then, like me, you'll always look at things differently.

Following Down the Road

Matthew 21: 1-11; Mark 11: 1-11; Luke 19: 28-40; John 12: 12-19

It was quite early when they came. I hadn't been out and about for very long – feeding the stock and that sort of thing – when I saw them. They simply walked up to where the donkey and its colt were tethered and started to untie them. "They're bold," I thought to myself, "even for horse thieves! Did they think I wouldn't see what was going on because the early morning sun was behind them?" So I went over to them, to confront them, to ask them what they were up to. And that's when they pulled me up short. They simply told me that "the master has need of these". That's when I recognised them. That's when I remembered who they were. That's when I knew what was going to happen. So I let them take both of the animals. I couldn't concentrate on my work after that. I wanted to know for myself what was going to come of all this. So I set off and followed down the road.

I was at the well with the other women when they went by. It was quite early in the morning and we were all gathered there for the usual gossiping about what had gone on since we had the chance to talk last morning. I think it was Sarah who saw them first – that small group of men making their way along the road towards Jerusalem. She didn't know who they were but she recognised the donkeys. "Aren't those Jonathan's beasts?" she said. That's Sarah for you. Can't tell one man from another but can recognise an animal at a thousand paces! I looked where she was pointing, not that it would do any good. I can't tell a sheep from a goat at the best of times. But I recognised the man who was riding on the donkey – and those others who were with him. It was the teacher and his followers. As they passed us I could see the determination on his face. He had come to some sort of decision and was going somewhere. I wanted to know for myself what was going to come of all this. So I set off and followed down the road.

I was on duty at the Bethany gate when I saw them coming. They weren't a large crowd so I wasn't that worried. I didn't think it was necessary to turn out the guard to prevent what looked like about a score of ordinary folk storming the city. I knew things were tense – it being the Passover – and we had been placed on alert so as to keep our eyes open for any rebel activity. But one man riding on a donkey followed by a few artisans and peasants didn't look like a rebellion to me. I called for the overseer and we stood side by side watching them as they passed through the gate and into the city. They were clearly heading somewhere and the overseer told me to keep an eye on them. I was pleased about that because I wanted to know for myself what was going to come of all this. So I set off and followed down the road.

I was playing in the street just inside the city gate. Some of the people about me started shouting. At first I thought they were telling me off for playing in the middle of the road. But it was nothing to do with me. They were excited because someone was coming from outside the city. It must have been someone special because they started laying their cloaks down on the road as they do when anyone important comes into town. And then they started cheering and praising the one on the back of the donkey at the front of the procession. He was clearly the important one. I thought to myself if all these people were cheering him and those others were following him something was going to happen. Something exciting, something new, maybe even something that was going to change the life of the city for ever. I wanted to know for myself what was going to come of all this. So I set off and followed down the road.

I had just opened my stall for the day when I heard all the commotion. People were running to line the side of the street, looking to see who or what was coming. They were taking off their cloaks and laying them on the ground so I knew they thought it was someone important. Some of them even climbed the trees and tore off the palm leaves to wave in acclamation. It was quite crowded in the narrow city street with all our stalls, so the procession – for that's what it clearly was – was having trouble getting through the crush. And all the onlookers were shouting and cheering. I could just see the leader of this mob was on a donkey. "Strange," I thought to myself, "for a leader to be riding a donkey. Surely a war horse would be more appropriate?" But then he was passed my stall and everyone in the street had picked up their cloaks and had joined the throng following him. I didn't know where he was leading them and they didn't seem to care. They just seemed to want to be a part of it all. I realised that so did I. I wanted to know for myself what was going to come of all this. So I closed my stall and set off down the road.

I was in the shadows. I'd taken a great risk coming here. One of our number – Barabbas – had been arrested only a few days earlier and it looked certain that he was going to be executed by the occupying Romans. I'd been sent to see if there was a way to organise our people who lived in the city so as to rescue him. I'd managed to slip in amongst all the chaos of everyone flocking to the Temple for the Passover but my face was known so I had to keep a low profile. That's why the procession took me by surprise. I could see who was at the head of it. His face was known too. He was putting himself at risk by coming into the city in that manner. Surely the authorities wouldn't let him get away with it? Surely they'd take action against him and his followers? Then it struck me. If that was the case there just might be a way for us to exploit this. There might just be a way for us to save our friend. But what was he up to on the back of that donkey? I wanted to know for myself what was going to come of all this. So I set off and followed down the road.

I was going towards the Temple when I heard the commotion. I was cross. I was angry even. Surely the common people knew that the Temple had to be approached in humility and reverence. The singing of the Psalms was reserved for the journey towards the city. Once you got here you had to approach the presence of the Lord with all due respect. Unseemly behaviour was not acceptable within the region of the Temple. The Law made that clear. There was a proper way for things to be done. That's been clear since the Lord smote Aaron's son for their failure to obey the instructions given in the Law. I know that. I've spent all my life studying the Law. Not like this rabble shouting and cheering. I went towards them. I was going to order them to be quiet and behave. That's when I saw him, riding towards me on that donkey. I knew who he was. He'd crossed verbal swords with me and my brothers before. Now it looked like he'd come back for another round. Well, he wasn't going to get away with it this time. He obviously had a plan but I'd make sure it would come to nothing. I wanted to know for myself what was going to come of all this. So I set off and followed down the road.

I'd heard the stories. I knew about the Hosannas and the palm branches. I'd imagined that bright Sunday morning where crowds of people lined the road just as they did for the carnival procession each year. I thought the whole city had been expecting him – were ready to greet him as their teacher, special prophet and promised leader. The more I learnt about the story, the more I realised that I'd got some of it wrong. The people weren't expecting him. While there was a plan even those closest to him had no idea what was going on. But they trusted him and did what he asked. More recently I've read about the symbolism in not one but two processions that day. I've read how the donkey is a symbol of peace and about the lots of other images in the text. But one thing echoes inside my head. When Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem and set in motion the events of that final, fateful, week, he knew where he was going. He just knew what it was all about. I realised if I was going to make sense of those Palm Sunday events there was going to be only one way I could do that. I was going to have to want to know for myself what was going to come of all this and how it was going affect my life today. So I set off and followed down the road.

The High Priest's Slave is Hurting

Matthew 26: 51; Mark 14: 47; Luke 22: 49-51; John 18: 10

It hurt. It really hurt. And there was nothing I could do about it.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning. It all started in the dark of that night.

The temple guards were summoned from their beds. That meant we slaves who were with them had to get up as well. I was told to get torches and distribute them. The guards meanwhile were putting on their armour and gathering their weapons. It felt like we were making ready for a war – or a big battle at least. Once everything was ready we were off through the dark streets of Jerusalem. Nothing was moving – only us.

You see, it was the early hours of the morning following the night of Passover. Most people would have eaten well and drunk even better. They would be tucked up safe in their beds by now. But not us. We were off on some fool's errand in the dark. Of course, being only a slave, no-one told me what was going on. But the guards were none the wiser either. They just followed their orders and marched after the stranger who was leading the officers out of the town.

In the end we came to this hillside. Like most of the ones closest to the city it was covered with gardens and olive groves. Even with the light from the torches I'd given out to the other slaves it was still a dark night. Everywhere looked the same. I had no idea where we were going as we worked our way up that hillside. But the stranger knew. He had a clear idea where we were going to end up.

Suddenly, without any warning, we reached the destination. There, in amongst the olive trees, were a group of men. They were all clustered about one man in particular. The guards hung back at a sign from the officer and the stranger went forward. And then the strangest thing happened. He kissed the man at the centre of the group.

Then all hell broke loose. The guards rushed forward and I found myself carried along by their tide. Suddenly there were swords everywhere and I was in the front line. Everyone was shouting. There was pushing and shoving and suddenly I felt a blow to the side of my head. Everything froze then.

Thinking back I can work out what happened now. I was standing in front of this big fisherman bloke who had been waving his sword about. He had struck me – by mistake I think from the expression on his face. But that blow had cut off my ear. Blood was pouring from the side of my head and my ear was lying at my feet.

When things started to move again it was the man that had been kissed who came to me. He bent down and picked up my ear. Then he placed it against the side of my head as he looked deep into my eyes. The blood stopped flowing, the wound was gone and the ear had re-attached itself. That's when I recognised him. He was that prophet bloke who only a few days before had marched with his followers through the streets being proclaimed as a king. I'd heard that he was seen as some sort of healer and he had just worked a miracle on me.

Once the moment was past things started moving in quick time again. Despite all the preparations it wasn't a big battle. The guards simply seized the prophet bloke, chased his friends away into the dark and we were off again down the hill back into town. We ended up at the High Priest's place and everyone knows the events of the rest of that night and the next day.

I followed most of them – slaves are not noticed amongst the crowd. I went with the rest to Pilate, then to Herod and back to Pilate again. I watched as the man who had healed me was whipped, mocked and finally made to carry his own cross to the place of execution. I stood helpless as he died before my eyes. And I wept - because that really hurt.

I had to stand and watch this man who had done me a great favour hung and suffered in the noon day sun until his strength gave out and his life slipped away. He'd done nobody any harm. People told me that all he ever did was good to others. The

same people tell me that the healing of my wound was the last good deed he was able to do on this earth.

And I didn't even get the chance to thank him. That's what really hurts.

Judas Seeks an Escape from his Guilt

Matthew 27: 3-9; Acts 1: 18-19

I don't know what to do.

For three years I haven't had to make my own decisions. All that time I knew what my next tasks were to be. I was guided. I simply did what he asked me to. And now he's gone – and his other followers, my friends, have scattered. I'm all on my own. There's no one to tell me what to do next.

It was so easy when we were on the road together. I had my jobs to do and everyone knew that. Most of them were interested in listening to what he had to say to everyone. They didn't want to bother themselves about the practical matters. He often had to sort things out that had got overlooked.

I remember that time we were all on that hillside in the late afternoon. Everyone was hungry – there must have been thousands of us – and no one had made any arrangements to see that there was food. I remember how everyone was coming up with this idea and that plan. But it was him who sorted out it. I'm still not clear how he did it but I do remember that there were baskets of food left over afterwards.

I think that's when I began to make plans. I'd always been a practical person. While his new ideas about the Kingdom of God were exciting, they didn't seem to be putting bread in the mouths of the poor here and now – let alone looking after him and his followers on the road. I remember talking to him about that and he told us all that the poor would always be with us. He would not be and we needed to make the most of the time he had to share with us. That's when most of the others saw that something had to be done.

They agreed that it would be best if one of us looked after our cash. We all felt that a single person should be charged with making the day to day arrangements. Since I seemed more concerned about it than anyone else, I got the job. Everyone was fine about it. It meant I didn't get to sit and listen to the teaching as much as they did. I had to do the running around and fix things up for the rest. But I caught up with most things at the end of the day. Everyone seemed grateful for the arrangements I had made.

O.K. So I didn't have the status of Peter and those two brothers who were always arguing over which one was going to get the best seat in the Kingdom. And there were times when he had to bring me back into line – like that argument about how that jar of rich perfume seemed to be wasted on him when we could have sold it to feed people. But I knew I was doing a necessary job – and the others knew it too – and so did he.

But I don't know what to do now.

I suppose it's my fault. If I hadn't gone to those people and tried to make a deal none of this would have happened. And he'd still be around to tell me what to do.

I could see the way it was going. This campaign in Jerusalem at the very centre of our tradition was going to bring us into direct confrontation with the powers that be. There was no way that they could overlook direct action such as that. We had to strike some sort of deal that would keep us all safe.

I didn't talk to anyone about it. It would have been no use. They were all caught up in the euphoria of that processional entrance he had insisted on making. They thought the long awaited triumphant taking of power was upon them. But I knew differently. That's why I went to see them. That's why I made the deal that I did.

I was going to tell everyone at the Passover meal what was going to happen. He stopped me though. He changed the way we celebrated that meal. He turned it into something new. We were all so caught up in the changes he'd made that I never had the chance to confess what I had done. But he knew.

The way he spoke to me and the way he told me to go and do what I knew must be done showed me he knew and that I had his blessing. Even later when I turned up in that garden with the soldiers and kissed him he knew what I was doing. He knew I was betraying him. He knew why I was kissing.

I was kissing him because he was my friend. I was kissing him because he was important to me. I was kissing him because I didn't think I'd ever be close to him again. And I won't be. My actions led directly to his death. He's gone. Peter and all the rest, for all their boasts of loyalty, have scattered and are hiding in the shadows as if they are ashamed of what they have done.

It leaves me all alone. With no one to tell me what to do.

I could fall back on what he taught. I could trust him even after his death. I could go on trying to help others even though I am responsible for taking him from them. But it's no use. He offered salvation for everyone. How can I believe him if he couldn't even save himself? How can he have that power over the world if I, as a single man doing what I thought he wanted me to do, defeated him and took his life? How can I survive that loss?

He promised all that he would welcome those who sinned into his paradise. He asked his followers to wait for him. I am his follower and there is no greater sinner than I but I can't wait any longer. My guilt is consuming me. My failure is overwhelming me. My sin is destroying any hope I have for life in this world or hereafter.

I don't know what to do.

There's no one alive now to help me.

But I must do something to end this self inflicted pain.

Herod Antipas Muses on Remarkable Conclusions Resulting From Unspeakable Acts

Luke 23: 6-12

"The end justifies the means." My father taught me that. Years ago when I was young he came to where I was and simply looked at me for a long time. It unnerved me. It looked like he had seen something that had frightened him or that he had had to deal with an unpleasant situation. I went to him and asked what the matter was. All he did was to say: "The end justifies the means." Then he came to meet me across the room and embraced me. He hugged me with a passion I had rarely felt from him before. Then he left me and it was several days before I was in his company again.

In those few days I heard about all the little children he had ordered killed. The servants tried to keep it from me but the ill feeling that was felt in the city had such a power that it forced its way inside the castle where I was cloistered. I couldn't understand it. I couldn't understand why the man I loved had done it. I couldn't understand what could have made my father order such an atrocious act. The brutality of it all was beyond my comprehension.

I tried to talk to him about it many times over the months and years that followed. But all I ever got was the same answer: "The end justifies the means." As I grew older I searched for my own explanation amongst the evidence I was able to gather. I found some solace in believing that it was to guarantee my inheritance of his kingdom – the continuation of our dynasty. It was only years later that I fully understood what it was all about. Only when I could apply the same maxim to my own unpleasant actions.

It was at the Feast of Passover that they brought this prisoner before me. The leaders of the church wanted him put to death. I didn't fully understand all the circumstances of the case. I wasn't really that interested in it. It was one of the odd ball teachers who arose from time to time who was trying to usurp their authority. They wanted me to step in and sort it out for them.

Come to think about it, it was all about authority. They had already been to Pilate, the Roman Governor. He'd passed the case on to me. That was interesting because he was showing the church that I had authority over them. But I knew that he had authority over me. That's why we never really got on.

But I had authority over the prisoner. I made that clear to all concerned. I was in control. Still, he didn't talk to me. I never heard his side of the case. His only defence was silence. Despite the pressure on me to have him put to death he didn't feel the need to refute their accusations.

I wasn't convinced by their arguments. There didn't seem enough against him to justify execution. So I ordered him to be flogged and beaten instead. Then sent him back to Pilate with my blessing. Let the Roman sort it out, I thought.

Don't get me wrong. Where there is a clear crime against the state, I'm willing to have anyone killed under the force of law. Look at that John character who was going about telling everyone that I was committing sin by taking the wife I had. That was definitely a strike at the stability of my rule. That's why he had to go.

But this Jesus was different. He had never said anything against me and seemed to be uniting the people rather than inciting division. I suppose that's why the church was against him. But I didn't need the church. I needed the support of Rome. Pilate had opened that door for me by sending Jesus for my judgement. I prized it open wider by sending him back. With that as a start I began to cultivate his friendship to make my position more secure. It was a pity for Jesus. The end justifies the means and nothing was going to happen to him now that I had declined to execute him.

I got that wrong, didn't I? Pilate had his own ends in mind. He saw a different picture – one that included the church being in his debt. So he had him put to death. He had him nailed to a cross of wood and left to die in the noonday sun. His followers and friends blamed Pilate for the death of their leader. And they blamed me too.

Strangely a few days later they weren't blaming us any more. As far as I can understand they were pitying us now. Saying we could never understand the parts we had to play in those events that had unfolded over that single night. It seems they accept that despite my best efforts to keep him alive, for I could see no wrong that he had done, Jesus had to die.

I tried to talk to some of them about their reasons. It all got very confusing with tales of earthquakes, empty tombs and the dead being alive again. They insisted that this spoke of the love that God has for his people. If that's the case, why did this very special and holy man have to die? Why can't they give me a clear answer on that?

Why is the best they can do is to say that the end justifies the means?

My Name is Governor Pontius Pilate *Matthew 27: 37; Mark 15: 26; John 19: 19-22*

What's in a name? Why would anyone get worked up over a name?

I'd understand it if I was insulting or abusing someone. I'd understand it if I was using a nickname to make fun of some disability in the person – physical or otherwise. I'd even understand it if it was a name they did not even recognise could be applied to them. But all I did was to use one of the many names that others had used in his presence to describe him and, as far as I can tell, he'd never objected to it. He didn't even object to it when I used it either.

I didn't call him master as his closest followers did. That would have been inappropriate. In this place I am the master. I have been given the authority by Rome over all who live in this region. I am the absolute master. He even acknowledged that. He told me that my power came from the far beyond. Everything is fixed, he said, and I couldn't change any of it.

He was right about that. I speak for the Empire and I must speak with the Empire's voice. No, I didn't call him master – and he didn't expect me to.

The crowd called him teacher. I didn't call him that either. When he was dragged into my presence he was a prisoner. He'd been beaten and was a broken man. Those who had seized him wanted me to pass judgement. The judge never expects to learn anything from those brought before him. They come seeking the wisdom of judgement, awaiting the considered verdict to seal their fate. No, I didn't call him teacher like the crowd.

But I learnt something from him. Through it all he remained in control of himself. Despite all the indignities that were visited upon him he was still a man and an extraordinary one at that. He taught me that even when the inevitable defeat stares you in the face, the way you conduct yourself is important. If all you have left is an ending, the manner of that ending is as important as everything that has gone before.

But I still didn't call him teacher.

I would have liked to have called him friend. I'd heard that wherever he went he reached out to touch the lives of everyone he met. It didn't matter if you had high status or none. It didn't matter if you were of his race or mine. It didn't matter if you were whole or broken. It didn't matter what guilt you were carrying, what crimes against man or the gods you had committed, he was there for you. I would like to have known that first hand. I would have liked to have called him friend.

That was impossible. As the living presence of Rome in this place it is the Jewish leaders I have to cultivate. They are the key to our power and the peace in the region. As long as they feel I am giving them what they want they will overlook that I am getting exactly what Rome has ordered me to obtain. That's why, in the end, I had to let him die. Anything to keep the peace.

When he was brought before me for that last time I knew there was nothing else I could do except bow to the inevitable. I had to let them have their blood sacrifice. And what did it matter anyway? He was just another of these rabble rousing religious zealots bent on turning everything upside down. He and his followers were only disturbing the Empire's peace that had taken me so long to create in this region. He was just another man.

So I washed my hands of the whole business and sent him on his way to the place of execution. But I sent him with what dignity was left for me to bestow on this condemned man. I left him a name that others had used and would recognise him by. I let him be called the King of the Jews.

I thought it was what they would have wanted. I thought with their power resting in their church, they would want to see this

leader claiming royal dominion over them broken and destroyed. I was sure this would build up their power when he died. In any case he had been every inch the king while in my presence and I wanted to acknowledge that.

But they got so upset. They told me that I shouldn't have done it. They told me that I had misused that name. I got angry then. I reminded them of my name and sent them on their way. I had written what I had written and it was there to stay with all the power of Rome behind it.

After all, it's only a name. But what am I missing? What's in that name – the King of the Jews?

And what name are those Jewish leaders – and the crowd – calling me now?

Nicodemus: A Man Alive Again

John 19: 39

It all started in the darkness.

It had to, didn't it? There was no way I could be seen associating with him in the light of day, was there? It would have started people asking questions. It would have undermined my position. It would have shown others that I wanted to know more about his teachings – and that would have encouraged them to do the same. We didn't want that. We – the council – didn't want even more people to turn to him for their guidance, their teaching. That was our job.

I mean we'd studied the laws and the prophets. We'd grown in the respect of the people. We'd been chosen to be the leaders of our community. That was our purpose - until he came along - until he started gathering his followers around him - until he started getting them to think in a new and original way about the things we believe in.

Many of my fellows were against what he was teaching just because they were not involved in it. Their way was best, the only way, and no other way was acceptable. But I didn't think that was fair. I couldn't go along with blind condemnation. I had to know more about what he was saying.

So I went along in the darkness. And that's where it started. He talked to me about beginning again. He told me that it was going to be like being born again. And I didn't understand him. No matter how hard he tried to explain I could not grasp what he was trying to teach me. But at least I'd gone and heard it for my self. At least I'd let the new idea into my mind. And on the way home the idea took root and grew.

Not long after, I knew what he meant.

And then it all ended in the darkness.

It was some time later that it all came to a head. In the end there were too few of us on his side. His enemies ganged up on him and he was arrested. Although it was on a trumped up charge they used their influence to see that they got what they wanted. That was to see him hung up on a cross of execution and left there to die.

Die he did, in an unnatural dark in the middle of the day. It all ended in that darkness.

Joseph and I did what we could afterwards. Maybe it was our sense of duty. Maybe it was our commitment. Maybe it was our guilt at not being able to stand by him. Whatever it was in that darkness we saw that his body was taken from that cross, prepared for the tomb and laid to rest in a manner that was fitting for his status as we saw it.

And that was it. It was finished. It all ended in the darkness.

Then it all started again in the darkness.

It was in the half light of a grey morning that the news came. People, closer to him than I ever was, rushed to tell me that they had seen him alive again. He was dead no longer. His promise had been fulfilled. I didn't believe it and had to go and look for myself. So I went to the garden and went into the tomb. Even though the day had moved into full light it was still dark in that tomb. But I saw that the body was gone. I saw that the tomb was empty. I saw what it was that I believed.

When I came out of that darkness I stepped into the light. Since that day I have tried to walk in the light that he has shown me. As I walk that path he has prepared for me – not an easy one - I know what I must do.

I must lead others out of their darkness into his light.

Joseph Riddles About the Family Tomb

Matthew 27: 57; Mark 15: 42; Luke 19:41

There's this old riddle: The man who orders it, doesn't want it. The man who makes it doesn't want it. And the man who wants it knows nothing about it. What is it? Obvious isn't it? It's a coffin. These last few weeks it seems like I've been living that riddle although in my case the answer was a tomb.

You see, I'm getting on in years and the wife has been on at me to make plans for the future so I thought it was about time I organised the new family tomb. It was last autumn when the old one collapsed in that earthquake burying all my ancestors good and proper. So as head of the household I had to make the arrangements.

It took me quite some time to find just the right place. I know it won't matter to the ones of us who will be lying in the thing but our family will want to come and "pay their respects" from time to time. So I thought to myself "Let's find a nice pleasant place to put it. A garden perhaps." You've no idea how funny people can be.

I must have been to 6 or 7 different locations. Each one of them a garden. Each one of them peaceful and tranquil. Each one of them well tended and a nice place to sit for the living to remember the dead. And each one of them overlooked by someone who objected to my suggestion that we have our family tomb built in it. I never realised that people could be so funny about death. I mean it's going to happen to all of us isn't it?

In the end I found the right place. I bought the garden – and the two adjoining properties just to make sure. The previous owners must have heard I was getting desperate for the price seemed a little higher than expected. But no matter, I said to myself, it's for the good of the family.

And then came the struggle to find the right person to build it for me. Several masons had been recommended but it seems the Romans are doing a lot of building work just now. Despite their hatred of the occupiers it seems masons are a practical lot and the Romans do pay well. So it took a little while to find anyone to take on my job of a simple tomb.

In the end I found him and I really must say he was worth waiting for. He and his team did an excellent job carving the cave out of the hillside and fitting it out with all the necessities for a good family tomb. The rock door for sealing the entrance was a particularly ingenious despite being so heavy that it took at least 3 of us to move it. Yes, when it was finished, he'd done a very good job – even though it did cost me an arm and a leg!

So, there I was, the man who didn't really want it paying the man who had made it who didn't really want it either. I thought that was an end to my active involvement in the project. I started going on about my normal everyday life until that day would come to pass when I'd need it. Then along came this other man who needed it sooner.

As in the riddle he knew nothing about it – being dead you see. The Romans had executed him. They had had him nailed to a cross and left to die. It wasn't just anyone – it was the teacher. You know, that young man with all the new and exciting ideas about the Kingdom of God. He came from Galilee about 3 years ago. You must have heard him.

Well, you won't be hearing him any more. Because the other Sabbath Eve he died at the place of Roman execution. And then along comes this mutual friend of ours – Nicodemus – asking if his body can be placed in my tomb! Cheek, I thought, I take all this trouble and spend all this money to have this brand new tomb made for my family and before anyone of my own line gets a chance to lie it, I'm being asked to give it to a stranger.

Then I thought about that stranger.

I'd listened to some of the things he had taught and they seemed to make sense. Others had given up established lives to follow him and share in the teaching. Even Nicodemus had risked everything – him being a member of the Council and all – to try and understand what he was preaching. Sabbath was coming on fast now and I could see his family and friends were desperate to honour him in death. I realised it was the least that I could do. I could always find somewhere else for my family. He couldn't. He and his friends had nowhere to lay his head.

So I went with them to the garden and placed the body in the tomb. We didn't have long but we did the bare necessities, telling the women they could come back after the Sabbath to complete the job. I helped close the tomb with that big rock door and left before sunset with the rest. He wasn't left to rest in peace though. The Romans had sent some men to guard the tomb in case anyone tried anything.

But that wasn't my problem. I thought that was an end to it. It was a couple of days later that I found about a new ending to my riddle.

It seems that the man who needed it and knew nothing about it didn't want it either. Inside 3 days despite the rock door, the Roman soldiers and even death itself, he up and left that tomb. He went somewhere else. Now, not only does that wreck my riddle, it's got to make you think, hasn't it?

Careful Thomas Trusting in a Promise

John 20: 24-29

They call me 'the twin' - because Thomas is a common name. That's fine for it's a fact. They also call me 'doubting' and I don't think that is fair. I never really did that. I just wanted to be sure – to see for myself. Where's the harm in that? If you'd been through what I'd been through you'd want to see with your own eyes as well. You'd find it difficult to trust what other people said to you. Especially one of those fishermen!

Oh yes, they're all nice as pie these days. They're changed men – just like the rest of us – but they weren't always that way. And I've known them for some time. I've known them when they were different people.

You see I'm the younger twin and therefore the smaller. People used to think me slower than my brother but that was not the case. I've always taken things that little bit steadier. I'm the cautious one if you like. That's what got them going. That's what kept them at me even when I was younger, a lot younger.

The first time I came across Peter was when I helped out with my brother when the fish were landed. I'd be there up to my waist in water helping to carry the day's catch to the shore. But because I was smaller I couldn't carry as much. I used to slow things down. This got on the nerves of the ones in the boat because it was making their job that much longer. So they started moaning at Peter – it was his family's boat and he was in charge even back then. He came up with this plan to get me out of the way – and for everyone to have a laugh at my expense.

He sent me to the carpenter's to ask for a long stand to put the fishing net on. The craftsman was confused at first and then he got the point. He said I had to wait until he could get round to it. So I said that was all right because Peter had told me I wasn't to go back without it. So I waited in his workshop until early morning became late afternoon – and then I got the point. I realised what had happened and how everyone was laughing at me.

I think the last laugh was on them though. While I was in the woodworking shop I met this new guy who'd come from Galilee. He knew what was going on and, while not spoiling their fun, at least chatted with me to pass the time. It seemed that he was a teacher or preacher of some sort with some radically new ideas. I listened with interest and said to myself 'I'd like to hear more from this guy if I get the chance'.

Well, the chance came a little later when Jesus stopped being a woodworker and went full time into the teaching and preaching. O.K. I was just one of his closest companions – and he'd recruited Peter and the rest before me – but I was there, at the heart of it, hanging on every word with all the rest. I experienced first hand what others only heard about from us.

That lasted three years. We had our ups and downs, hardships and luxuries, but we never thought it would end in the way that it did. That Passover time was perhaps the hardest time I've ever known. All the promise and hope taught by Jesus were destroyed when they killed him. I'd trusted what he had said but it was no use. They were only words and they had let me down. I was gutted I can tell you.

So. Look at it from my point of view. I've lost my direction and the person who guided me has gone. I'm trying to come to terms with it all, trying to work out what it means. I've gone off on my own for a bit and when I come back all the others are telling me I've missed out on seeing him risen from the grave. They are trying to get me to believe that he is alive again.

I can remember looking from face to face, seeing their joy, and suddenly I'm back up to my waist in water. 'This is a trick,' I say to myself, 'They're having a laugh at my expense again. It's the old "long stand for the fishing net" routine again'. So I tell them: no way, not this time. I've just been let down by the one person who above all others I thought I could trust, so why should I trust you lot – especially as you've set me up before. I insisted that I'd only believe when I saw for myself.

That's seems fair, doesn't it? After all Jesus promised that he would be there for me, so I'll wait for him. I was only being careful and cautious.

Do you know what? He came. He came again to the locked room and showed himself to me. He insisted that I was to put my fingers into the holes in his hands and the wound in his side. He made sure that I knew everything that he said was true and the whole affair of him rising from the dead was no trick of man. It had really happened and he is alive.

He'd do the same for you – I'm sure of that. If you want to make sure for yourself he's waiting just for you. All you've got to do is to tell him what you want him to do – what deep down inside you need to have happen to change your life in the way my life was changed – and it will come to pass. He loves you that much.

It's no trick. You can trust him. I have no doubt about that and neither should you.

A Drunk on the day of Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-13

Well, that sobered me up I must say. It was quite scary really.

Not that I was that drunk. After all, it is a feast day. The feast of Sukkot - or Pentecost - you know, the harvest festival when we offer our first fruits to the Lord. Not that I'm a very good Jew but I'm always ready to make an offering of the first fruits from the vineyard!

Me and my mates had been at that since the tavern opened. We were doing pretty well. Decided it was time to get something to eat and Samuel suggested that we all went to old Abraham's place on Sheep Street - the other side of the market square. He always laid on a good spread on feast days.

There we were making our way - as best as we could - when suddenly we were stopped in our tracks. There was this group of blokes standing right in the middle of the square. They were talking at the crowds. There was no way you could avoid them. You felt you just had to stop and listen.

And I did just that. They were talking about the Kingdom of God and good news for everyone. Pull the other one, I thought. You've forgotten about the Greeks and the other foreigners in the crowd that always turn up in Jerusalem at party time. They won't be able to understand a word you're saying. Only us Jews can understand. And so your message from God is just for us, the chosen race, as always, I thought to myself. That made me feel quite pleased about who and what I am.

But then I noticed - on the other side of the crowd - another one of this mob seemed to be speaking gibberish from what I could hear. I went a little closer and realised he was talking to a crowd of Greeks! And what's more, they seemed to be hanging on every word!!

"And I thought I'd had a lot to drink!" I said to myself. "Don't know who's the drunker - the one speaking the garbage or the ones listening."

I must have said it out loud for "Oh no," says one of the Greeks who obviously understood what I'd said, "It's not gibberish. It's perfect Greek. It's all making perfect sense as well."

I couldn't believe it. I just stood there open mouthed, looking at this simple man addressing a crowd of Greeks in their own tongue. Then, all of a sudden, I recognised him. He was that fisherman bloke. You know who I mean - one of that crew who used to follow that prophet bloke about. Now, what was his name? Roman's did him in not so long back ... Joshua ... no, Jesus, that was it. He was one of his men. How on earth could he be speaking perfect Greek?

I just stood there, then, listening to everything that was being said. The more I listened, the more it made sense. Scary hey, as I said. In the end I didn't know which of us was drunk anymore - me, the ones doing the talking or the other ones standing around listening to them.

All I can tell you is if he was drunk, I wouldn't mind having some of the stuff he'd been drinking!

Section 2 The Longer Pieces

Miracles

This is a short piece of drama which may be used in Worship or some other appropriate occasion. It can be lengthened into a longer piece by adding the reflections as appropriate from Section 1 at the ## marks.

A Waiting Room. Two people are waiting.

*One of these is **Alice**. She represents all those who might be termed the huddled masses, the oppressed, the desperate. She might come from Africa, Asia, South America, the eastern states of Europe or the slums of any “civilized” nation. She appears to be dozing as she waits but in fact she is so tired, so lacking in energy, that she is simply slumped waiting for the end – any end.*

*The other is **Brian**. In contrast he is full of energy. He sits, then stands and paces, before sitting again. But he is never still. The more we watch him the more we can sense that he is a troubled, possibly tormented soul. He is desperate for some release.*

*After a pause these two are joined by **Charles**. He is dignified, reserved, never called Charlie. He is struggling with a disability – perhaps only needing a stick to walk with to ease his pain. He takes the centre seat between **Alice** and **Brian**.*

*There is another short pause, broken only by **Brian** as he cannot keep still until:*

Brian: (Exasperated): What are we waiting for?

Charles: I'm sorry?

Brian: I said, what are we waiting for?

Charles: I hoped they'd be someone here that might be able to help me.

Brian: I've been here for hours. So's she.

Charles: That's unfortunate.

Brian: Why do we have to wait?

Charles: Even though I've just come I'm prepared to wait – no matter how long it takes.

Brian: O.K. If that's what it takes I'll wait with you.

***Brian** sits in his frustration but cannot settle. He leaps to his feet again.*

Brian: It's no good. Why do we have to wait?

Alice: (Barely stirring): Because that's what you do – if you believe something better is going to come along.

Brian: Oh. You are alive then?

Alice: I'm still hanging on, yes.

Brian: And what was that you said?

Alice: You're waiting for something better.

Brian: What are you going on about?

Alice: You. You're just like the rest of us. You want something. You're here because you think that there's something, someone, that can make a difference in your life. You're waiting for that change to come. You're waiting for a promise to be fulfilled. At least, that's why I'm waiting. And I'll wait a lifetime to have my life transformed.

Charles: Like Simeon.

Brian: Who?

Charles: Simeon in the Bible. He did wait a lifetime.

Alice: Yes. Just like Simeon.

Brian: Simeon. (As Simeon): ##

Charles: And his waiting was fulfilled.

Alice: After years of waiting he got what he was waiting for.

Charles: And he rejoiced in it.

Brian: I don't feel like rejoicing. I haven't got that sort of patience. I find it hard enough to sit still. Can't you see how desperate I am?

Alice: You're desperate? I wish I had your energy. I'm starving to death. That's real desperation!

Brian: And you think he's going to help you?

Alice: Of course.

Brian: Why?

Alice: He always meets people's needs. Do you remember the first thing he did?

Charles: At the wedding feast. He helped out there by turning that water into wine.

Alice: That's right. There was a shortage and he saw that it was overcome.

Charles: A wedding feast at Cana. (As Wine Steward): ##

Alice: He still wants to give people what they need.

Brian: So you think just because he made sure a wedding party didn't run out of wine, he's going to step in and stop you and your people starving to death? You can't live on wine alone.

Alice: Well, it wasn't just wine. There was food as well. He fed those thousands of people who'd come to hear him – and used only 5 loaves and 2 small fish to achieve it!

Charles: That's just managing resources and not making food out of nothing.

Alice: How about the net full of fish he produced for Peter and Andrew on the sea of Galilee?

Brian: Luck. Pure Luck.

Charles: They said it happened twice.

Alice: It was a miracle.

Brian: Maybe he had some secret knowledge that meant he knew where the fish were.

Charles: Maybe but you have to wonder how those fishermen felt about that.

Alice: Yes, you have to wonder.

Charles: It must have blown the minds of those simple fishermen!

Brian: Mind blowing! (As Andrew): ##

Alice: Yes, you have to wonder. I guess they must have felt that he was something really special.

Brian: I guess it must have seemed like that.

Charles: Yes. And he was.

Brian: What do you mean?

Charles: Just a comment.

Alice: No. Go on. Say what you think.

Charles: Well, it was more than just making food and drink appear from nowhere that set him apart.

Brian: Wasn't that enough?

Charles: No, not really. Take the feeding of all those people. Maybe that wasn't such a miracle.

Brian: Go on.

Charles: Everyone says what a great orator he was so maybe he just appealed to their better natures.

Alice: You mean he simply got them to share what they already had?

Charles: Yes. That's it.

Brian: But you said there was something more than that. Something that set him apart.

Charles: He seemed to have control over anything and everything. You remember – he calmed the storm.

Alice: And he walked on the water.

Brian: He cursed a fig tree and it died.

Charles: And met a woman at a well and changed her life forever through a single conversation.

Alice: A woman at a well. ... (As the Women at the Well): ##

Brian: Yes, he changed her life and mind. But can he help me? My mind is falling apart.

Charles: Time and time again he helped those with troubled minds.

Alice: He helped lunatics and those crippled by their own fears.

Charles: And he helped those who were physically crippled as well.

Alice: Yes, that's right. Remember the lame man he healed on the Sabbath?

Charles: The one by the pool?

Alice: Yes. By the sheep gate.

Brian: A man waiting to be healed. (As the Man at the Gate Called Sheep): ##

Charles: He helped that man to walk again. Why won't he help me? Has he got limits to his powers?

Alice: No. His power is endless. He healed lots of people.

Brian: Lepers by the dozen. Blind people by the score, Dumb people wherever he went. No illness was too great for his healing touch.

Charles: He even brought people back to life.

Brian: He did?

Charles: Yes. Don't you remember Jarius's daughter?

Alice: The unexpected death of a little girl.

Charles: He brought her back to life.

Alice: Just imagine how her doctor felt! (As Physician Luke): ##

Brian: So he was able to heal people who he met.

Charles: Not just those. There were those he healed that he never met.

Alice: Like the Centurion's servant.

Brian: Didn't he go and meet him?

Alice: No. The Centurion told him that he was used to acting under orders and took his word for it.

Brian: And the servant was healed – through his master's faith. I bet there was trouble over the Roman soldier associating with a Jewish rabble rousing prophet!

Charles: The Roman army with all its rules and regulations. (As Centurion): ##

Alice: But he threw away the rule book. That's why they came after him.

Brian: That's not the point.

Alice: What is the point then?

Brian: He reached out to everyone and anyone.

Charles: And it was their faith that healed them.

Brian: Their faith in all the good he was doing?

Charles: Their faith in him.

Alice: That's why he had to die. Because he was turning their way of looking at the world upside down and inside out.

Brian: But he kept on trying. Kept on changing things for the better. Kept on showing his love for us.

Charles: Even at the very end he was still healing broken people. In the garden – as they were arresting him – taking hold of him to drag him off to his painful and horrific death – even then he found time to heal.

Alice: In the midst of all the chaos he reached out and touched someone who was hurting. (As High Priest's Slave): ##

Charles: Yes, that was his last miracle: the healing of the High Priest's slave's ear.

Pause

Alice: That wasn't his last miracle.

Brian: What do you mean?

Alice: That wasn't his last miracle. His last miracle came 3 days later – when he rose from the dead.

Brian: Yes, that was a real miracle.

Alice: Imagine being around for that one?

Brian: You have to wonder, don't you? Wonder how Peter felt about that one. I mean, he had been closest to him, hadn't he?

Alice: Imagine how he must have felt when he met his risen Lord.

Charles: His world must have gone through a roller coaster of change. (As Peter): ##

Brian: Yes, Peter's world had changed forever.

Alice: And ours.

Charles: All because of that Jesus's last miracle.

There is a pause why they all consider this and are transformed by it.

Brian: (Confidently): So, what are we waiting for?

*All 3 stand. They embrace one another in fellowship and leave the stage transformed by their personal encounter with the Risen Lord. Significantly **Charles** leaves his walking stick behind.*

How Many Miles to Bethlehem?

A series of meditations for the Advent season.

Leader: Each year at the Christmas season we tell the stories that surround the events that happened so long ago in a small village in a distant land. That land was occupied and oppressed by a hostile army. Yet the peoples of that land still had hope. They knew that one day god would send them a saviour who would redeem the people. The stories in the Bible tell of that journey to salvation. Everyone caught up in the stories seemed to be on a journey. How can those journeys to Bethlehem speak to us today? How can we travel to that village so far away in space and time. Perhaps these accounts from those who might have been present at those times will help us.

If the meditations are used at separate services the following introduction could be used:

Leader: This year during the Advent season we tell the stories that surround the events that happened so long ago in a small village in a distant land through the eyes of those who might have been present as the events unfolded. Today's eye witness is ...

Rachel: My name is Rachel. I'm a cousin of Joseph the carpenter. You know the one. He's got his shop in the main square in Nazareth. He's well known for his work - whether its making a cupboard or mending a wheel. When there's a carpentry job to be done everyone in Nazareth says "Go and see Joseph, he'll sort it out. He works miracles in wood!" Of course, being his cousin, I might be a little biased. But next time you want some wood working doing you go and see my cousin Joseph. Only he's not there at the moment. It was the taxing, you see. You remember, when the Romans wanted to count us all and ordered us all back to our ancestral home towns. Being part of the same family as Joseph - the line of David - I had to go back with him to our home town - Bethlehem - the city of David. There was quite a crowd of us on the road but I couldn't understand why Joseph insisted on taking his wife Mary with him. I mean, she was so pregnant. Her time had almost come. But she insisted as well. Said it was the right thing to do. I couldn't understand it. Riding all those miles over the rough roads on a donkey that they'd managed to borrow. It must have hurried the baby's coming. That's what happened not long after we'd arrived in Bethlehem. A fine baby boy. But then, all sort of strange things happened. There were unexpected visitors bringing all kinds of gifts and strange noises in the night. Joseph even said that he'd been told by a messenger that the baby was in danger. That's why Mary and he didn't come back with us after the counting. And now his carpenter's shop has stood empty for weeks. Everyone in the village is struggling to find someone who can do good wood working. I knew no good would come out of that journey the Roman's made us make. I knew no good would ever come out of going to Bethlehem. Sometimes I wonder why any of us made that journey.

Ruth: I was in Bethlehem when it all happened. I'm Ruth and I work for Solomon the innkeeper - waiting on tables, looking after food and all the rest of the usual entertainment. At the time it happened we were very busy and full to busting because the Romans had decided to tax everyone again. I remember the couple from Nazareth coming. They'd travelled so far. But we didn't have any room when they arrived. There was just nowhere to put them - let alone any space to give them the sort of privacy they needed. But Solomon could see how pregnant the wife was and he came up with a plan. He told me to show them to the stables. And that's where the baby was born. In the middle of all that hay and those animals. It smelt a bit. But at least it was dry and warm. They were happy enough - Mary and Joseph. They were just like any other couple with their first new born baby. But then all the strange things started to happen. The shepherds came looking for the baby saying they'd heard strange

noises in the night. Then a few days later the rich strangers came bringing with them all their camels, servants and rich gifts for the baby. They said they'd seen a star. I remember that star too, dancing in the night. Those were the happy times. It's a pity they didn't last.

Soldier: Marcus Calvus Apellinus, legionnaire in the 7th. Cohort, stationed in Jerusalem to support the puppet King. Mine was not a pleasant job. Our officers had been ordered to give him full cooperation – as long as it didn't threaten the stability of Roman rule. That's what he said came out of his meeting with those wise men. He said they had told him of a direct threat to Rome that had to be nipped in the bud. He said a new king had been born that one day would overthrow our rule. If only those wise men had been a little wiser and not gone to Herod then none of this would have happened. If only they'd kept on travelling, following their star, I'm sure they would have got to Bethlehem in the end. And maybe I wouldn't have had to do what I did. But no-one asked my opinion. I was given my orders – and orders is orders. The Roman Legion always follows orders. My orders were to march - and to kill. March to Bethlehem and kill all the boy children under two years old. Just because the King had ordered it. Fine King he was! Wonder why we didn't just tell him to go and do it himself. I just don't understand it. How could a new born baby threaten the might of Rome in any case? It's not that the birth of a single child is ever going to change the world, is it?

Leader: When we look back it might have seemed at that time as if the whole world was travelling to Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the wise kings from the east, the Roman soldiers - and the baby Jesus. They were all making their way down the road, travelling the miles to Bethlehem. But Herod didn't go. He chose to stay away. Each of those who did go took something with them. Mary and Joseph brought the baby. The shepherds had their sheep and other simple gifts. The kings carried more fitting presents. And the soldiers brought death. But the baby Jesus brought something with him too. He brought the gift of life for all people for all time. And everyone who went to Bethlehem to play their part in the story of his birth - even the Roman soldiers - had access to what the baby had brought. But Herod missed out because he decided to stay at home. What about you? Will you miss out? Or will you come with us to Bethlehem to claim Jesus's gift of life for yourself this Christmas?

Mary: A Life of New Beginnings

A series of reflections focusing on Mary, the mother of Jesus

A New Life:

My life has been filled with new beginnings. I remember them all. It seems so long ago. Even the first one when I stopped being a child and began to become a woman. I was so looking forward to having a husband - and I even approved of the one the match maker had picked out for me: Joseph the carpenter.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I know that some people said he was only a common workman. I know others said he was plain - if not ugly. I know he was a few years older than me. But when I looked at him I knew that he would make a fine husband.

Even though he worked all day, every day, with heavy pieces of wood that had roughened his hands, I knew his touch would be gentle and kind. I'd watched him carving a cradle for one of the women who lived in our village. The way he used the chisel showed me how careful he was. I knew he would be a good and kind father to our children.

I was looking forward to that new beginning in my life.

Then, suddenly, without any warning all that changed. In the middle of the night, when the world was fast asleep, my life was turned upside down.

I was woken when someone called my name. I opened my eyes and, even though it was the darkest part of the night, the room was filled with light. At first I didn't know if I was still dreaming. Then I saw him. A shining figure standing in the middle of the room and calling me by name. That made me sit bolt upright in my bed I can tell you. Well, I mean, it's not every night that a young girl gets visited by an angel.

I know what you're thinking. I know what you're going to say. I know what you're going to ask. How did I know it was an angel? Well, all I can tell you is that if you'd been there you would have known too. It was one of those times when you had to be there to fully understand. But even though I was there I'm not sure if I fully understood what went on.

I did know the next morning that my life was going to be different from what I thought it would be. As you know the angel told me that I was going to have God's son. I didn't know what to expect - me being a virgin and promised to another and all that. And I suppose I was still waiting for something else to happen - for God to turn up perhaps. It was only as the weeks went by that I realised the full impact of what the angel had said. That's when I had it confirmed that I was already pregnant.

That was the first new beginning for me and my child to be. Don't get me wrong. I knew I would have babies one day and was

looking forward to it. As I have already said I knew Joseph was going to make an excellent father. It seemed though as if God had other ideas and I thought I was going to have to deal with that all by myself. Luckily I was wrong about that as well.

The families worked it all out. I knew he was a good man - and I think he really did love me. Joseph stood by his commitment to me. We were married as soon as we could decently make the arrangements. Then all that was left was the problem of the baby who couldn't wait to be born. Joseph even came up with a plan for that.

He sent me off to my cousin Elizabeth's. We'd heard that she, too, was unexpectedly with child so maybe by putting us together people would be just too pleased to see the babies that they would overlook the calendar.

That was a funny meeting too. Elizabeth told me that it was as if her unborn baby knew when I walked into the house. It was as if even before they were born her baby was proclaiming the greatness of mine. I couldn't understand that either but it confirmed what I had felt when I met the angel that night. I stayed a long time with her talking about what our two children would do together when they grew up. I think Joseph plan would have worked if the Romans hadn't intervened. That's why he had to call me back home. That's why we had to go to Bethlehem at just the wrong time for me.

You see, from time to time, when it suited them, the Romans wanted to count everyone that they ruled. They also took the opportunity to collect their taxes at the same time. And to make sure that no one was overlooked, they made us all go back to our home towns. Now, my home town was Nazareth. But because I had married Joseph, I was now part of his family. So now we had to go to his home town. He was of the house of David and that's why we had to go to Bethlehem.

It was a hard, long journey. Everywhere there were people moving about the countryside at the whim of our Roman masters. And for me it was the worst possible time. When we got there the town was filled with people. Crowds thronged the narrow streets and I was pushed and shoved as we made our way along. Joseph was desperate to find us a room for the night but all the inns were full.

And then it started. The pain, deep down inside me. I'd seen other women - other daughters of Eve - suffer the same pain. I knew the baby was coming. And Joseph knew it too. Even though I said nothing, he knew. He became more desperate in his search. But nowhere could we find a bed, let alone a room.

In the end there was this one innkeeper whose wife saw what was going on. She told him to let us make use of the stable - more like a cave filled with straw and the smell on animals. That's where my baby was born. That's where I experienced the next new beginning.

I'd been a girl who had changed into a woman, a woman who had become a wife. Now I was a wife who had become a mother. When it was all over I looked at my son lying in the feed trough Joseph had lined with fresh straw and I knew he was so special, so perfect.

I guess every mother thinks that about her new born child. I almost dismissed it as childish nonsense. But then all these strange things started to happen. The herdsmen from the hillside arrived anxious to see my son. They talked about being told to come and bring gifts to a new born king. I didn't understand that at all. And when, a few days later, those travellers from foreign lands turned up, I was really getting confused. But Joseph stood firm throughout. He was my strength and support.

I don't know what I'd have done without him. It was difficult enough for me as a young mother coping with my first child in a strange place. All these visitors only made matters worse. I was relieved when one morning Joseph said it was time to leave. Little did I know as I packed our few belongings he had in mind to take us into Egypt and that it was going to be many years before we would see our home in Nazareth again.

And yet, as it turned out, he'd done the best thing for my baby and me and at just the right time. We had been on the road for only a couple of days when the news of the awful massacre caught up with us. How could anyone kill all those small boys? Why would anyone want to do that? But my baby was safe. Little did I know it wasn't going to be the last time that I felt joy mixed with sadness when I thought about my son.

A New Beginning:

After we came back from Egypt we settled back into the everyday routine of Nazareth. We had some happy years then - my husband, my first born, his brothers and sisters and I. We were just another young family growing up in an ordinary town in the middle of nowhere. Nothing exceptional about any of that. And then it all changed.

I remember as if it was yesterday. Just another day. Then Joshua took off his carpenter's apron, hung it on a nail in the workshop and came into the kitchen. He looked from Joseph to me and there was a different look in his eyes. Both of us knew his time had come. In the end he simply said "I must go", embraced each of us and walked out into the wide, wild world beyond the town of his childhood. His apron is still hanging on that nail.

It was not the last I saw of him no means. He was back in his home within a few months and I spent a long time travelling with him and his brothers in the next couple of years. But it was another time of new beginning for me and my son. My son had become a man. But that wasn't even the half of it!

It was in Cana the next time things changed for ever. It was just a simple wedding celebration but someone hadn't realised how many people would want to be there. They had not bought enough wine. I remember all the other women moaning about it to me - as if it was anything to do with me! In the end - out of frustration I guess - I told my son what was going on.

"You should hear those women!" I said, "You'd think they were the ones who wanted more to drink to celebrate this happy day. But it's true. It's going to spoil the party if no more wine can be found. Someone should do something about it."

I remember the strange look that came into his eyes then. Sort of whimsical, distant, as if he was considering some weighty problem. Then, and not for the last time, he surprised me. He went and spoke to the steward and large jugs were carried into the room. I went over and looked but it was only water. I didn't understand. Then he went over and moved his hands over the jugs.

The next thing I knew the stewards were serving what people were saying was the finest wine of the day. I knew it was my son that had done that. He'd changed that water into fine wine. He had started to show how much he cared about people, even in the smallest of ways, by making things different.

Oh, I'm sure you remember how he changed other people's lives as well. How he made the blind see, the lame walk and even the dead rise back to life. But always he was showing that he cared about people. He never did things for show or to get credit for himself. He just wanted to care - just as he cared about those wedding guests and a celebration that teetered on the brink of disaster because of the lack of wine. He provided simple solutions to complicated situations - simple for him that is.

Don't get me wrong. He didn't pull them out of thin air - as some people thought. He had a sound basis for what he did. Ever since he was a child he was interested in the Torah. I remember when we lost him in Jerusalem once we found him at the heart of the Temple. There he was confounding the teachers and scribes with his knowledge of the law and the prophets. How they smiled to see such knowledge in one so young!

But that knowledge - and his expression of it - didn't always go down too well. I guess that why I started to follow him around with the rest. It was after he was made to feel unwelcome in his own home town. Well, it was their fault really. They knew him well enough! They knew the sort of things he would say! So why on earth ask him to read from the scrolls and speak in the synagogue? It was bound to be controversial and not go down well.

That evening, after they had thrown him out of the synagogue, as we sat together - the whole family - he said "I'll never come back here." Like everything he said we knew it was the truth. The rest of us knew what it meant. If we wanted to see him again, the only way we could do that was to follow him. So we packed up that night the few possessions we needed and the next morning shook the dust of Nazareth from our cloaks. Another new beginning for me and my son the teacher. He led, we followed.

He was good at getting people to do that. Everywhere he went crowds would flock to see him. Sometimes there were as many as 5 or 10 thousand clamouring to hear him speak or simply to be in his presence. I guess we of the inner circle were the lucky ones. We could get right up close, hang on his every word and see everything he did. Even when he wanted to be alone and disappeared into the desert - or got Peter or one of the other fisherman to ferry him across the lake - we'd know where we could find him later.

But we never had him to ourselves for long. The word soon got round that the Rabbi was in town. The curious and those hungry for knowledge soon came crowding to the place where he was staying. I think they came because he cared. He never turned anyone away no matter how bizarre the approach, no matter how difficult the question. He took the situation at face value and gave an honest response to the need. Always teaching, always explaining, always illustrating how the law and the prophets could speak to us today.

The healing he did seemed to us who were the closest as just an extension to his teaching. It was sort of a practical example of how things could be changed for the good. People only had to listen and put what he taught into practise. Everywhere he went people saw that it made sense. In each town and each village more were added to our numbers. We were a movement that was sweeping over the lands of Galilee, Samaria and Judea. The sheer force of his personality carried us along.

I suppose that is why we missed it. That's why we overlooked what was going to happen when he made his next decision. That was my next new beginning. When we went up to Jerusalem - to the heart of the opposition. None of us saw that this new beginning was going to lead to pain, suffering and death.

A New Majesty:

I'll never forget that first day. It was a procession and not a journey. Even now we don't know how all those people knew he

was coming. Even now we cannot understand why he received such a welcome from perfect strangers. Looking back I'm still amazed at their joy when welcoming us to the city. That was certainly a new beginning for me and my son proclaimed as their king.

Everything started so well - even though he turned over the tables in the Temple precincts and scattered the merchants and traders. That went down well the common people. Too long they had let ritual and self interest interfere with their true worship of God. He swept through that place of extreme conservatism like a cleansing wind.

But the common people have no power. Those without influence can exercise no privilege. The ordinary are always suppressed by those who have made themselves superior. In the end the established order will always strike back at that which tries to overthrow it.

Don't get me wrong. Not everyone at the heart of the matter was against what my son was doing. I know most of the Council were against him on principle - the principle that they hadn't thought of it first. But one or two of them were on our side. Even if they felt they had to come in the dark night to meet with him - the dark of the night.

I don't know where the week went. Suddenly we were meeting for the Passover meal in that upper room and he was talking about this being the last such time we would share together. I didn't understand that then but by dawn the next morning I knew what he meant. I knew what was going to happen. I knew he was going to be taken from me.

The events of that night and the morning that followed are well known. But can you even begin to imagine what they did to a mother's heart? Can you feel what I felt? By that Sabbath eve I had felt and seen the worst of the new beginnings for me and my son who was the condemned man.

I stood there, at the foot of that cross, and watched him die. I listened as he tried to be caring to the end. He screamed out in his pain and anguish the words of love for me, his friends, the ones who were dying with him, those who had brought him to this agonising end and for the world. But even he couldn't keep going. He had to submit to the inevitable. He knew that death had to claim him. And so he died as I looked helplessly on.

A darkness filled me then. My heart went cold. An emptiness overcame the warmth that once had been such a part of me and my life following my son. That was the most painful of the new beginnings for me and my son who had died.

A New World:

Once they were sure that he was dead - after they had cruelly thrust a spear into his side - the Romans allowed us to have his body. It was a broken body with the marks of his painful end clearly to be seen. Not that I saw them clearly. A mother's tears were filling my eyes as I tended to my dead son. It's not right that a parent should bury her son.

But bury him we did. Time was against us because the Sabbath was coming on fast. Not that we were worried about breaking the Law in our need to exercise compassion. We just didn't want to attract any more anger from the Romans or Jewish leaders. We didn't want their rage to be directed at anyone else. We wanted no one else to die. There was just time to wrap him in the grave clothes, cover his face and lay him in the new tomb that had been given to us before the sun set.

We sealed that tomb as best we could. We used a heavy stone that took several of the men to move. We didn't want any interference with his body by those who had already taken his life. And then we had to leave him. We had to go. That didn't feel like a new beginning. That felt as if it was the end - the very end.

It was two days later when I realised just how wrong I'd been. On the first day of the week, in the early morning light, when I went with the other women to finish the grave work that we had barely started.

Don't get me wrong. We didn't go willingly but it was our duty. The last acts by which we could show that we cared for the person who had died. We gathered the oils and ointments that we would need, collected the fresh linen and were ready when the first sliver of the sun came over the horizon to end the Sabbath and light our way to the tomb.

It was a strange journey in that half light. We small band of women making our purposeful way through the empty streets. Each of us wrapped in our own thoughts, each one carrying their own grief, each of us trying to be brave for the others, and not one of us thinking straight. It was only when we reached the garden where the tomb was that we realised it was a wasted journey.

When the tomb was sealed a particularly heavy stone had been chosen to close the opening. And here we were a small group of women, some of us well past our prime, coming to roll it away! As we paused on our journey in the midst of the garden we realised just how absurd we looked. Even I almost laughed at our lack of preparation. I'm sure my son would had made some observation about the strength of our faith. But my son was dead.

Still we went on. Perhaps we hoped to persuade some Roman soldiers to help us or maybe to find a gardener or two to lend strength to our weak and feeble arms. Or maybe we did just journey on in hope. Imagine how we felt when we arrived at the tomb.

There it was shining in the early morning sunshine. Everything was quiet. There were no Roman guards to be seen. There were no gardeners tending the grounds. And there was no stone blocking the entrance. We were thunderstruck. Our first thoughts were that despite all our plans and preparations someone had broken in and removed the body. We all were devastated, heart broken, distraught at losing even this chance to say a final farewell. We felt cheated that we could not offer this last act of service. As one we all rushed for the empty tomb.

Then we could see that the tomb was not empty. First, on the slab we had lain him, the improvised grave clothes were still there. There was no way that anyone stealing a body would have left those behind - particularly all folded neat and tidy as these were. That would have made no sense at all. But there were two people in tomb - figures shining with light that I had seen once so long ago - and I knew that we were in the presence of angels.

The others spoke to them. They heard the news that my son was no longer dead but risen. They were instructed as to what they had to do next. But I needed none of that. Even as one or two of them went rushing about the garden trying to find a more rational - more sensible - more ordinary explanation for this extraordinary event. Even when the truth was revealed in a personal, living, loving encounter in another part of the garden. The moment I saw that empty tomb, I knew what had happened. In the middle of the night, when we'd all been fast asleep, the world had been turned upside down.

It was just another new beginning. Just another new beginning for me and my son. But there was something different about this one. It was for everyone - no matter where, no matter when. It was for all people for all time.

This new beginning was a new life for all. And was the reason for all the rest of the new beginnings that had filled my life.

Peter: A World Without

Following one man's journey from the first Good Friday morning to the dawn of the Monday following the first Easter Day.

Foreword

Paragraphs, like this one, printed in italics are putting the pieces that follow into context for the reader. They do not necessarily form part of the reflections.

Saint Peter was no ordinary man. He was the fisherman chosen by Jesus Christ to be the leader of His church that would be made up of fishers of men. And yet, Simon Peter, the man who would become the Saint, was an ordinary man. And he suffered the ordinary emotions of a man in extraordinary times.

Nowhere can this be seen clearer in the personal journey he travels over the first Easter weekend. It starts in the cold of the first Good Friday morning where his betrayal of his friend drives him from the warmth of the fire in the courtyard, travels by the foot of the Cross in the darkness of an unusual noon, to a hill side watching the sun rise on an empty land, and comes to rest in a drunken stupor in an inn where even hope has deserted him. But that was not the end of the story. The next morning finds him amazed that the world can be changed by a disappearing body and twenty four hours later finds him contemplating another dawn on a world that is forever without sin.

This journey speaks to the heart of the Christian message by stripping away the facade of goodness to reveal the ordinary man that was the stony ground chosen by God on which to build his Church.

The Beginning of the End

Dawn: The First Good Friday: Outside the High Priest's Courtyard A World Without Heat

Jerusalem. The Feast of the Passover. The city is crowded and people are abroad whatever the time of day or night. Even though it is spring, the nights still hold a chill. Those abroad in the darkest hours before the sun rises have gathered around braziers and other fires to warm themselves.

At the High Priest's house there is more activity than elsewhere. Temple Guards have brought in the Rabbi Jesus. A restless crowd fills the courtyard. There is only one topic of conversation.

Suddenly a man runs from one of the warming fires. Startled people watch and wonder why he should flee the light and warmth of the courtyard. But he is soon forgotten. There is only one topic of conversation.

This is the place to be. This is where Jesus is going to get it.

Just outside, in the shadows, the man stops running. He leans against the wall and sobs. A cock crows. Dawn is rising slowly. It is the morning of the first Good Friday. The man, Peter, suddenly realises where he is and what he has done. As he turns to watch the sun rise his thoughts turn over the events of the last few hours:

It's cold. Oh, it's so cold ... That's why I'm here. That's why they saw me. That's why He saw me. That's why I said what I did.... It's cold.

Peter looks out over the darkness of the sleeping city. His eyes come to rest on the hills beyond:

We were resting - up there in the olive grove - waiting while He prayed. We all must have let our attention wander again as He talked to His Father - our Father - and then they were there. So many of them, so few of us, all around us with their torches and their swords. We tried to fight but it was too late. It was all hopeless and He knew it. All of a sudden, in the dark of the night, it was all over. Three years wasted and there was nothing we could do. Nothing. There was nothing we could do.

They weren't interested in us - His followers - they wanted only Him. And they took Him away. I tried to follow but there were so many of them and they knew where they were going so I got left behind in the dark and the cold. I didn't know where they were taking Him. I didn't know what was going on. I felt so lost and so cold.

Then I knew where it would all end. I knew who wanted him stopped - Caiaphas. So I came here - to his palace - to the place where that priest would gloat in his victory. I came here to be near my friend and to see if there was anything I could do.

Don't get me wrong. I didn't come willingly. I was scared. I was all on my own having walked the streets for hours and yet I still had to come through the dark and the cold. Like a moth drawn to a candle I was drawn to the place where it was all going to end. To stand outside the walls in the dark and wait for the concluding acts to begin to be played. To wait by the gates as an actor in the wings for his moment to stride forth on the stage. I stood, silent, still, in the deepening cold. And the cold slowly filled the space left when they took Him from us in the grove.

Peter looks around once more in the grey light of the dawn. He looks back over the path he took when he fled from the courtyard. Once more his thoughts retrace his recent steps:

Again moth like I was drawn. This time by the warmth of the fire in the courtyard. By the life and light to fill my emptiness and cold. I left my vigil in the gateway and stepped out onto what was to become my stage. I didn't think - I couldn't think - the cold had numbed my brain - I just went. And there - in the centre - by the fire - it happened.

I stood watching the ebb and flow of the flames, feeling the life returning to my cold, numb, limbs, as the logs burnt out their lives in the brazier before me. Thus I dwelt in life and death, warmth and cold, when someone spoke.

He asked me my name - asked me if I was my master's friend. Took me by surprise and I suddenly found myself saying 'No' - telling him I was not who I am. It was ... it was ... cutting myself off from everything - my life, my people, my history - and suddenly I was cold again.

I turned to go - ready to draw back into the cold and dark - when another voice stopped me with the same question. I was getting confused, pressurised, and in my rush to leave the centre of attention I did it again. I wanted to scream out loud. I wanted to call it all back - back to the dark - back to the olive grove - back even to Galilee before all this started over three years ago. That self torment froze me.

That battle inside of me meant that when the third question came it was too much. I exploded. I lost that composure that He had built in me and suddenly the three years were all gone. It was all over for me. And then ... I saw Him. And I saw that He knew what I had done and then the memories came flooding back.

I remembered He told me that I would do it ... He told me that I would deny Him and myself.

And then ... and then ... the cock crew. And I ran.

There was nothing I could do. All the hope, all the promise, all the light reduced to running in the dark and standing in the cold. Oh, it's so cold. I'm cold and it all finished in the fire light when I said 'No' those three times and He heard and knew that the light had been overtaken by the darkness and His warmth had been swallowed into the cold.

It's so cold. And now the cold is filling me and all the world.

Peter finally leaves the scene of his failed vigil and moves off into the awakening city to gather his

scattered friends. Maybe in the warmth of friendship he can find something to replace the cold of his failure and loss.

The End

Noon on the First Good Friday: Calvary A World Without Light

A crowd has gathered at the place of execution. Even in their silence and stillness there remains an air of expectation. Some world shattering event is about to take place.

A procession approaches. Roman guards are escorting the condemned to their execution. Now the crowd becomes more vocal as they hurl insults at those about to be killed. They watch as crosses are dragged up the final hill. The men fall exhausted at the end of their final journey.

Silence returns as the guards complete the grisly ritual. Rough hands force arms and legs onto the crosses of execution. Large, rough forged, iron nails are driven through wrists and ankles. Ropes bind the limbs in their final embrace. The guards strain once more as the crosses are hauled upright to the roar of the crowd.

Peter stands with others as close as he can to the cross that carries his friend. He watches impotent as his teacher slowly but inexorably dies. Finally the gruesome act is over. All that is left is a dead body hanging on a cross. It is approaching noon on the first Good Friday:

So now I know the truth. From his own lips I've heard it - just as I've heard it for the last three years. "It is finished". Finished. Complete. Concluded. It is over - all over now.

Even to the very end He was trying to give an order - a purpose - to our lives. Entrusting John with the care of His mother; commanding her to care for him. He was a person to be obeyed. He was so clear and direct in His instructions - 'Do this not that', 'You've heard that this is the way but I say this is what you are to do', 'Rise up and walk' - all very direct commands. All immediate instructions from a man who seemed to be something more. At the end I could clearly see Him for what He was.

Oh, don't get me wrong, He tried to keep going. Even as He hung there on the cross He tried to convince those gathered here vulture-like that there was something that set Him apart. He asked for forgiveness for those who had whipped Him and nailed Him and hung Him there to die. What sane and sensible human being could do that?

Who in their right minds could do that?

Then He always was extraordinary otherwise I'd have never followed Him and look where that's led me. To the foot of a cross on which hangs my Lord, my master, my teacher, my friend.

A friend who promises total strangers hanging next to Him that they will join Him in paradise. A friend who made the lame walk, the blind see, and the dead rise back to life. A friend who at the very end was thirsty, like me, who called on His God but felt forsaken, like me, and who admitted that it is finished - like I must do. What a friend.

What a man. His abilities, His talents were far in excess of mine. He shone like a lead light in the dark, miles in front, cutting a path on the leading edge of time for us who chose to follow. ...

Suddenly, Peter is distracted. He looks around and cannot believe what is happening:

It's getting dark. It's can't be much later than noon but it's getting dark. As I look the light is fading - being swiftly overtaken and in filled by the dark. As if the very air was losing the power to illuminate and the world was losing its ability to show a clear way.

Strange. He always used to say that He was the way ... and the light. Once or twice He even called us the light of the world, telling us to shine before men so they would have something to follow - somewhere to go. And now, as He dies, as His followers and supporters scatter, as even I give up and acknowledge that it is all finished - the light is fading from the world when it should be at its brightest.

A strange thing about the dark. It can only be there in the absence of light. We cannot project it, we cannot make a beacon of dark to shine in the daylight to show a path. We cannot use it to conceal in the same way that we use light to reveal.

Maybe that's what He meant.

Maybe He, we, all of us who try and forgive those who persecute, love all those who hate, help all those who need it - maybe we are lighting small fires of hope in the midst of the darkness of despair that seems to be always with us. Maybe we are illuminating the hatred, injustice, greed, envy, and all the rest that is about us, within us, so much a part of the darker side of our nature and the world's that cannot sustain itself in the full glare of the words of love He spoke and in His direct way told us and showed us must be proclaimed. Maybe that's what it's all about.

Maybe that is what it all was about.

It is finished He said. It is over He meant and the light fades from the sky, the land, the world, the universe.

We who were once pillars of light in the darkness are now spluttering candles and flickering lanterns, flashing briefly before they burn no more and shed no more light into the darkness that envelopes the world. Light is a transient thing. Illumination is temporary. "It is finished" and the darkness once more can fill, flood, and rule this land and all who are in it.

It is finished.

Peter is left in a world without light.

The Beginning of the Interlude Dawn on the first Easter Saturday: A Hillside near Jerusalem A World Without Hope

The sights and sounds of the crucifixion have long gone. Bodies have been buried and graves closed. The city had returned to normal as the Sabbath rushed on. Peter in his grief has walked the streets and byways for hours. Now he sits on the top of another hill, once more looking over the city. He listens to the dawn chorus greeting the sun rising on a world without hope. A cock crows once more stirring Peter into thought:

Was it all only yesterday? Is that the same bird that announced the end now greeting another dawn? The sun rises on an empty land, empty of all I have trusted in. Rising on the start of yet another day.

My life was exciting. We used to talk the night away. We never knew what was going to happen next. In those dim hours of far off early mornings we would hang on every word, listen and try to remember those tales of the Kingdom of God, reflect on the miracles and teachings of the day that was past, and wonder on what the day that was to be was going to hold. But all that's finished now. All that's gone.

Today will be an empty day for there is no purpose, there is no hope, there can be no change to the established order. Even the sun knows that, taking up its appointed role after the brief hiccup yesterday afternoon and, as I sit here, I'm sure the rains and the winds are preparing to fulfil their ordered and appointed tasks. Tomorrow will be the same. Change and the unusual have been supplanted by order and the mundane.

Did I expect the death of one man really to have that much impact? Did he mean so much to me that he has taken from me all the will I had to live? To share and enjoy? To be alive? How strange for me, so used to relying on my own judgement and capabilities to be reduced to this - sitting in the dust on a Sabbath morning desolately watching an empty sun burning its way into an empty sky over an empty world.

Is it really me who has changed? Did I really expect so much? Who can tell?

"You yourselves know the answers". He was fond of saying that. Look inside yourself and you will find the truth, the things you need to know. And what, now, is inside me? What do I know?

Once ... once my life was ordered. I knew where everything was and how it all fitted together. Living was easy. It was settled into a routine that was upset from time to time when things went well and surprise was the pleasure giver. Then there came this man - He changed all that.

In destroying the order He built up an expectation - a longing - like me now sitting here waiting for the sun to rise - the glow in the east proclaiming its coming - that what was He did to my life. No more could I count on knowing what would happen next - no more expect the daily round to be rewarded by an extra few fish in my nets or a joke with a friend in the inn. We didn't know what was happening to us and yet - and yet - as with that eastern glow, we knew something was coming.

Something special, something real, something fresh - like a new unspoiled day. And then, just as it seemed that it was upon us the sun of our expectation changed its mind and darted back below the horizon. And with it went all our hopes and plans of the night for the tomorrow that had been promised - it was all useless.

"Before the evil day comes when you will take no pleasure in it", so wrote the prophet. That evil day is here for me now. And I take no pleasure in it.

I can't go back, return to that ordered existence that once was so rewarding. When I touched that new way of life that made everything that once was pale stand out clear in the bright sun, the change was complete. A joke with a friend became nothing when compared with a word with the master. Jokes with friends - I'm the biggest joke of them all!

I've lost my innocence. I know what it is like to be changed and to see how the normal and mundane can be replaced by the new and exciting. And it's all been taken from me at a single stroke. And there's nothing left. Nothing. Except an empty sun in an empty sky shining on an empty world.

It's not just empty of Him. It's not just empty of the new ideas and way of life He brought. It's empty of the very stuff that life is made of. It's empty of hope. At least it is for me and in a very real way now that's all I can find to care about.

Why did the sun have to rise this morning? Why does life have to go on when there is no more hope in the day that is dawning?

It's all over and it is useless.

In the end, despite his anger and frustration, Peter is forced to leave his mountain top and go down into city below.

The End of the Interlude The Evening Following the Sabbath: An Inn A World Without Love

We move outwards and downwards from the hillside into the city. We follow Peter as he goes hither and thither searching for something. He does not find it. The day passes, the Sabbath is over and Peter enters an inn. Here he drinks for some time and is continuing to do so in a desperate attempt to rediscover what is missing for him in this world without love:

All day I've searched this city - looking for some sign, seeking some pointer to show me that things were different - to show me that He had been alive and that He had made some impact on this earth. But no - nowhere could I find such a sign.

I went to the temple - the temple He said He would destroy and it still stands. Oh sure, there's some confusion over some storm damage or other, and yet the services go on. The people stream in and out and even the tradesmen, moneychangers, and merchants that He threw out are back plying their wares. Nothing has changed. Everyone is still out for what they can get and their needs come before the interests of others.

I walked the streets. Everywhere I went I saw it. I saw it in the rich merchant who refused to help the beggar man at his gates because he needed to preserve his profits, I saw it in the Roman soldier who took the slave girl against her will because he is the superior and she represented all who must submit. I saw it in the two lepers fighting over the crust of bread given to them by those who wanted to proclaim to the world that they cared while their bellies were full of meat.

Oh yes, they cared all right. Giving away the crusts and scraps from their tables while they feasted on fine foods and rich wines. Caring by giving up what they could afford to do so - not needing to count the cost as they had already stored it up in their own vaults - or stomachs - and they had far more than they needed. People who want the world to know they care but no way are they going to risk their position in it.

I suppose that for this more than any other reason He had to die. He challenged people at the very point where they held things most dear to themselves - the rich man his wealth, the Pharisee his law, the priest his ritual and show, the poor their very poverty as an excuse. For all, He had very basic standards - clear cut instructions.

Say what you mean and, if you mean it - having said it, do it. Don't pretend. It's all very basic. Set the standard and keep it. You know it is right, you know it makes sense.

Sense. What bloody sense? What is the point of doing what He says - look where it's taken Him - hammered to a tree - and look where it's taken me - to the bottom of a jug of wine.

Peter calls for a fresh jug - more wine to dull his pain:

Wine! Bring more wine!

He refills his beaker to drain it in a single draught. He fills it again and lifts it in mock toast:

This is the only truth. To empty a beaker and know that reality slips away with each mouthful. To face up to it - the poverty, the disease, the realities of oppression, greed, and envy that surround. To face up to it all and in a couple of mouthfuls and a swallow or two watch it all fade away in a wine tinged smoke. That's what's happening with Him.

That's what He told me. He told me I'd betray Him and I did. He told me the world would turn against Him and it did. He told me He would be delivered into the hands of His enemies and they would whip Him, persecute Him, and kill Him - and they did. All very sensible and rational and logical solutions to a very real dilemma.

But I loved Him.

He changed me, took me out of what I was and turned me into something new. He taught me to care, first for myself and then, more importantly He said, for others. And I knew it was right. I knew He was telling the truth. And for that I loved Him.

I can't think of any other word to describe it. To care for Him, for His ideas, opinions, to be willing to die for Him. That's what I mean. That's what I said to Him, to others, to anyone who will listen even now. I loved Him.

And then in that courtyard the crunch came. There I was on the spot. You've said it - so do it and what happens? I denied Him, like the rest. I turned away for my own self interest and let Him face up to His fate alone. I denied Him and I denied my love for Him ... and I denied love itself.

Love is a very special word. It means so much. It took that one man to His death because He loved everyone and no-one, not even me, was prepared to show their love for Him. At the final moment, when it all came to a head, no-one loved Him. So when He was nailed to that cross we had the only source of love in the world held up high for all to see, and when He died, love died.

His death took love from this world. No more can we say we love unless we are prepared to do what He did and die for it - setting aside self interest in the name and for the cause of love. Fine ideals. Easy to proclaim from the warmth of an inn. Easy to foresee the situation and your reaction to it when your belly's warm with the taste of wine. And then one day it happens.

No more theory - you're standing in a courtyard by a fire as dawn fast approaches and suddenly, without warning, you meet those who will test your love. Then you find you've lost the love, sunk it behind the clichés of 'I'm better alive than dead' or 'I can do more if I stick around' and all the rest. But you still deny your love.

Stop and think a minute though. Every time you deny your love, you deny the love that is in this world until you, like me, come back to seeing it nailed and hung there for us all to see. I know. I've been there. I've seen it all. I stood cold in the courtyard, I stood lightless by the cross, and I sat hopeless on a hill top.

We are in a world without warmth, light, and hope, and most of all without love. All that is left is the crystal clear reality of the situation and the only way to combat this is to drink until you cannot see it any more.

We live in a loveless world because we killed love when we nailed it to that cross. All that is left to us is to face up to the horror of this situation - or not, as the case may be.

As the evening wears on, the wine continue to flow free and Peter finally sinks into a drunken stupor. Who can tell the horror of the dreams that would fill his head this night?

The Beginning

The First Easter Day morning: The Inn as before A World Without a Body

The dark of the night is past. The new day is once more rushing upon us as the sun rises in the eastern sky. A cock crows and we find Peter is still sitting in the Inn. His stupor is over. He is wide awake and struggling with new found disbelief:

I don't believe it. It's not true. There is no way that the body could be gone. No way that the stone could be moved. No-one would want to do that. And yet ... and yet ... that is exactly what Mary's just told me has happened. I can't believe. It's all too ... predictable?

Let's try and be logical about this. We took Him from the cross and wrapped Him in the grave clothes and placed Him in the tomb. That was Friday - in the midst of that unnatural dark - and before the Sabbath. We sealed the tomb with a stone that took four of us to move and, for good measure, or as if he was expecting trouble, Pilate had sent a squad of men to guard it. Then ... I forget - things must have fallen apart for me. The events of two sleepless nights catching up. I remember watching the dawn

coming up from a hill top and walking the streets looking for an answer - some change in the city, the people, to show that He had been alive. I remember failing and, without hope, ending up here yesterday evening, and the despair that led me to drink myself into a stupor.

And then - this morning - Mary comes with the news. The body is missing. But it's not just that. First, in the night, there had been a disturbance - an earthquake - something that frightened the Romans away. Then in the dawn light the women had come and the stone had been moved from the entrance. They saw that the body had gone but the grave clothes were still there.

This can't be right. This can't be real. It must be their grief that's doing this. It just can't have happened - but there's more. The women told me that in the tomb they saw two men clothed in white and they knew that the men were angels. They told the women that He was risen and they were to go and tell everyone. In their grief, in their despair, in their panic, was born a hope, a joy, and they ran to proclaim it.

But not Mary. Maybe her grief was deeper - I don't know - but I do know that she told me she started searching - trying to find someone, something, that would tell her where she could find her lord, her friend. In her anguish she had not heard, did not understand, and suddenly there was a figure who called her by name and she knew that she had found Him - alive - risen - concerned and caring that her hurt should be healed. And in His direct, positive, way He told her what she had to do - "Go and tell all my people and Peter that I am risen."

He knew where I was, He knew what I had been doing. He knew the very state of my desolate and destructed mind. So He sent a particular word to me - here - the one who had betrayed Him in the courtyard, the one who three times had denied His name.

It can't be true. It must be the insane ramblings of hysterical females. They want Him to be alive so much that they have imagined it all. That's what it is. That's the answer.

Or I'm still drunk in a deep sleep and I'm imagining it - because I want it too. Because deep down inside that's what I've wanted for the last three days.

Three days.

"I will destroy the temple and in three days rebuild it." Three days. Is that what He meant? Can it really be true? Oh Lord, are you really again with us?

There must be a way to find out. Let me think. I can always go and look for myself.

I'm scared. What if it is all a dream? What if it is the product of hysteria? What do I do then? Well, I've lost nothing. I'll be back where I started on Thursday night - facing up to the reality of a world without my friend and teacher. So really I've no more reason to be scared now than I had then.

I've more reason to be scared if it is true. The whole world will be turned upside down. My world will have meaning again. I'll know then what I must do - how I must lead my life - trusting in His teaching and His love and in Him. It's as easy as that.

Sit here and have nothing - no hope, no love, no future - or go and see, or even simply believe what I have heard, and then all my doubts, my questions, and my fears resolve into one clear cut answer: trust in my Lord, my friend, and do what He has told me to do.

All I have to do is to believe - or go and look.

All I have to do is something.

We leave Peter, wracked with his indecision, in this world without a body.

Continuing Where He Left Off Dawn the First Easter Monday: The Upper Room A World Without Sin

For Peter, yesterday had been a busy day. There was much to see, much to discover and much to share. And the events of the day were surpassed by the events of the night that followed. Suddenly the next dawn is heralded by the crowing of a cock and Peter is contemplating a world without sin:

Dawn. The sun rises for the fourth time in as many days. And again I watch the light filling the world and yet again it is a different world that I look out upon. A world changed - a world transformed - and a world unaware of its transformation. Unaware until we tell it, that is.

Only last night, here, in this very room where last Thursday we dined - only then did I become aware of how great this change

was - when He told me - when He was here again.

I ran to the tomb yesterday morning. After all the doubts and agonising when I heard the news, when it came right down to it, I ran. People in the streets as I rushed past them thought I was mad, some called after me that I should be more careful, but I had to know and I had to know as soon as possible. For that knowledge was going to decide if I would spend the rest of my life without any purpose or hope, or whether the answer to everything was going to be revealed to me. I ran, all the way to the tomb, and then, at the very threshold, I stopped.

Once more afraid, once more uncertain, unwilling to enter the shadows to see if the light was there. But I did and saw what the women had seen. The empty tomb and the folded grave clothes and then, I, too, knew. He had risen and in that rising redeemed all mankind and opened the way for the world to be saved from sin.

My heart was glad. It made me light headed. I wanted to run back through the streets again and this time to shout out the news. Everything He said was true and once more my life and the last three years had a meaning and a purpose. He was alive and so was I. As I came out into the sunlight again I suppose reason took over. It was only three days earlier that they had arrested Him and put Him to death and the fear of what they might do to me had led me to deny I even knew Him. And so I didn't run through the streets but went quietly about the town gathering together those of us who knew Him and ending up here to share the wonder, joy, and planning for the future.

And then, even though we had locked the door, He was there - here - with us. "Peace be with you" and He was here. It seems nothing can keep Him out. Everywhere and everyone is open to Him and He reaches out through the tomb to touch us all. In the full light of day, in the darkest depths of night, and in the cold light of dawn.

Dawn. Dawn on a new world changed by one man's death - transformed by God's love and the resurrection of His son.

Inside four days I have experienced hope and joy destroyed in a world without heat, light, and love. I have stood in a courtyard, at a foot of a cross, on top of a hill, and in an empty tomb. I have sat alone in an inn and with my friends and each time known the presence of the Risen Lord. That which was destroyed and taken from me has been restored and in its restoration given a certainty and a force that has taken over my very being, my will, my purpose, and renewed me in the pursuit of the ideals that were set for me.

Love does strange things. Love denied Him, drove me from cross to inn, and then to empty tomb. Love demands that I go on doing what He would have wanted me to do. I don't know how and yet I know that I'm not on my own.

When I denied Him in that courtyard I spoke for everyone who has ever known my Lord, my friend. He repaid that denial, my denial, our denial, with a gift of love.

That gift of love demands that we must all repay it in the same way.

Paul's Last Letter

I like to imagine Paul the apostle sitting at his writing table under house arrest in Rome writing to his friends and fellow followers of Christ one final time before his execution. He does not know when it is going to come but he knows that it will be soon. He writes to try and put his life in order. A sort of autobiography of the highs and lows of his time of service to his Lord.

Saul of Tarsus:

My very dear Philemon,

Thank you so much for the greetings and messages of support which I have recently received from you. And thank you particularly for the messenger, our brother Onesimus, whom you have returned to me. You will see that I write this in my own hand for in the midst of my captivity there are few who can serve me. As I told you in my earlier letter our brother will be of great use to me in the Lord's work – particularly so in the difficult days in front of me.

You asked me to write more about my life so that the brothers and sisters of your community may know me better. This will aid them in their understanding of my other messages that I have sent to you all along the way and the path that the Lord has asked me to walk. It is perhaps fitting that I do so at this time for I believe my journey in this world is coming to an end.

I find myself at the very centre of power and influence in our known world which is where I felt the Lord was leading me to be. Yet I remain isolated – cut off from the support of the fellowship and ignored by the very powers that I have come to influence. Always guarded, with everything I do under the closest of scrutiny, I remain certain in the love of the Lord. In his strength I shall prevail until the end and whatever that brings with it.

But enough about these last of my days. Let me write instead to encourage you. Let me tell you of the journey that has brought me to this place. Let me give you the account of how I came from Tarsus, by way of Jerusalem, Damascus and many other villages, towns and cities in the lands beyond to this last resting place in Rome. Instead of the ending let me tell of the many beginnings that carried me ever onwards in the proclamation of the Good News that has been handed down to me.

My life began in Tarsus but even there the Lord was working, long before I knew him. I was my father's son. He was a Jew who had a sound sense of business. He was recognised amongst the commercial community as well as being well respected by his own people. We Jews in Tarsus are different from those living in Judea. We are prepared to interact with the Gentiles, learn to speak Greek and we are proud of our Roman citizenship. In that way I was proud to be my father's son.

He had made sure that I mixed with the students and teachers at our town's University. My fluency Greek meant that I could understand the language of philosophy and theology as well as that of trade and commerce.

By exposure in that way to new ideas whilst at the University challenged the principles and precepts that I was born to accept. Secure within a good home, accepted within the worshipping and serving congregation of my local church and comfortable as the son of a successful businessman it was only natural for me to resist anything that seems to be a potential upset in my lifestyle. Instead, as many before me and since, I clung more firmly to the basic tenants of the Law and the Prophets.

So it came to pass that once more my father saw that which I did not. I had become focussed on the Law. I was convinced that this was the Divine instruction and teaching from God revealed through Moses and the other Prophets. It provided us with a guidebook for the best way of living that would be pleasing to God and for our own well being. However, the more the Law is explored, the more complex matters become. In the end it will either overwhelm you or make you fanatical about it.

My father witnessed this inevitable conflict arising within me. There was only one solution in his eyes. He knew that in order to better equip me against this onslaught I needed more education than could be provided in my hometown. So he arranged for me to go to the centre of our faith in Jerusalem. There I would receive the training to become a Pharisee, gain a deeper understanding of matters of faith and maybe one day rise to become a Rabbi.

And so it was that I, a Jew, and a Greek speaking citizen of Rome, set out on the journey that over the years was to lead me to this very centre of power. There were many events along the way that influenced me and helped me to gain a greater understanding of the Lord's will for my life.

And the first of these happened outside the walls of Jerusalem. There I first confronted the followers of our Lord. There I publicly and passionately opposed them and all that they stood for. There I was certain that I was upholding the Law which was being so openly flouted.

There I watched Stephen die.

The Stoning of Stephen

I can still see it now. The first stone hit the right cheek. It must have struck the bone because the skin burst wide open and there was a gush of blood. That aroused all who had gathered there.

It's not that they weren't wound up already. That Stephen was a troublemaker from the moment that new cult made him a leader. Everything he said was blasphemy and I knew that he was going to get what he deserved.

The Council had got really worked up because of what he said before them. Fancy trying to lecture the High Priest on the meaning of the Torah! Fancy trying to tell all those scholars what the Law and the Prophets meant! And then, on top of it all, laying on them the responsibility for all the wickedness and sin in the world. Accusing us of ignoring God's laws. After that there was no way back for him.

Oh yes. They might have let him off if he'd recanted when they gave him the chance. They might have turned a blind eye if he'd taken it all back. But he wouldn't. He stood firm on what he called his faith. He insisted that all his lies were the truth.

That sealed his fate. By then the Council was really worked up. Their blood was hot and there was only one way it was going to end.

So they dragged him out into the street, gave me their cloaks to hold and started to stone him to death. All very Jewish. All very proper. All strictly according to the Law - and all very right.

From the moment we saw the first drop of blood we knew we were doing the right thing. We knew it was right. If he claimed to be under the protection of his Lord there was no way we could have hurt him. There was no way those stones would hit him. There was no way he would bleed. But he did and we knew we were right. So then the stones flew thick and fast after that.

I remember watching as one struck him full in the face. The next moment his right eye was gone. Then we moved onto his

body. That fine young body was systematically battered and broken by the relentless rain of rocks. Each time we hit him we knew he was wrong and we were right. Our cries of triumphs must have been like the snarls of scavenging jackals certain of their prey to those battered and torn ears.

Funny though. Despite all the physical damage we were causing and the obvious pain he must have been feeling, it didn't seem to touch him at all. He just stood there meekly taking it all. His one good eye seemed to be focussed on something beyond us. He was acting as if nothing was happening. He just stood there and took it all.

Then someone got lucky and shattered his left knee. That's when he fell to the ground and we knew we'd got him. It wouldn't be long now. He wasn't going to last much longer.

I thought the pain must have finally unhinged his mind at this point. That's when he started talking. I'm not sure whether it was at us or the usual riff raff from the gutter that always gathered at times like these. But he was talking. I remember clearly what he said.

"Look. I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand side of God!" Well, you can imagine what effect that had on his tormentors. The torrent of stones became a deluge. The other leg was next to go. The right arm followed. And by now I could see a rib or two sticking out of his bloody and battered chest.

And yet, he still had that far away, serene, look in his eyes. And he still wasn't quite horsemeat.

But his end wasn't long in coming. As he began to die he raised his one good arm. He wasn't trying to ward off the deadly rain. It was more as if he was reaching out to something - someone - that only he could see. And then - the strangest thing of all - he spoke once more. And he said the most amazing thing.

In a calm voice without any sign of distress he said: "Lord! Do not remember this sin against them!"

We couldn't believe our ears. It stopped the deadly hailstorm - but only for a second or two. Then it was all over. After a final volley we were left with the body of just another blasphemer.

The Council members came and collected their cloaks. Then I picked up a stone and moved forward to play a part in this lawful execution. I stood there, looking down at the body and I could hardly believe that he was dead.

He looked so calm - so at peace. It was almost as if he was sleeping even though he had a bloody eye and broken limbs.

What gives a man such self assurance? What gives someone that confidence to face even a violent, painful and certain death without fear? It's not like he didn't know what he was doing and what would happen. He'd had enough warnings. But from somewhere - somehow - he'd found the faith to meet us head on and embrace even death with his faith that something better was going to come to pass.

Even in death he challenged me and made me think.

And I never did throw that stone.

Light on a Dark and Lonely Road:

It's not easy to stand and watch someone with such strong convictions, such all embracing love for everyone, such faith, as they die a painful, lingering death. It is a challenging and sobering experience even if you feel that the act of execution was not only justified but also necessary. But I had stood there - and I had watched - and I knew that we were in the right.

Others had doubts. Some of them talked to me about their doubts. I was able to reassure them by pointing to the words of the Law and the Prophets which are the cornerstones of the Jewish faith. That helped them. They could see the sense in it. Their certainty made me cling more firmly to the Law. If it helped others survive in a changing world, then it was all that I needed as well. It was all that mattered to me. And that made me more determined than ever to see this new faction of our faith suppressed, curtailed, brought into line. If necessary I was single handedly going to make sure of that.

You see I was desperate to beat up these people because the words of Stephen still echoed in my head. I combed Jerusalem searching for those to persecute. I had a taste for it, a hunger to wipe out this new sect - anything to silence that voice. But no matter how hard I tried, how many people I set upon, that hunger would not go away. The voice would not be silenced,

That's why the Council gave me authority to carry out the necessary work that I believed was prepared for me. They saw my zeal and eagerly granted me their commission to go to Damascus and bring to an end the new movement in that place. Anything to get me out of their hair!

So I set out from Jerusalem leading my men, ready and eager to do the Council's work.

On that journey I began to have my doubts. I don't know if it was because we left the city by the very gate that Stephen had been stoned outside or whether it was the unease amongst my men about the gruesome side of the task before us. But I do know that with each step along that road a spiritual darkness began to flood into the recesses of my mind.

Deep down inside I knew what Jesus had said made sense but it was at odds with all that I had been taught. And now the acts that I was about to set in motion in that town we were marching towards would lead to more deaths under a hail of stones in the heat of the sun. I would have to stand and watch as again and again those with stronger faith than mine responded to our violent and angry acts by offering us love at the very end. Each step made me more uncertain. I asked myself if I could take much more of this. Every mile along the road meant I moved closer and closer to the answer that was waiting at the heart of the darkness within me.

By the time we were getting close to that town the darkness was complete. I remember coming over the rise where I could see Damascus in the distance. I can remember knowing that my time of trial was coming and there was nothing I could do to avoid it. I just had to meet it head on and hope I had the strength to survive it. Then, all of a sudden, the darkness burst around me and I was swallowed up into it.

I fell to my knees, unable to move forward because I could not see the way. I cried out in my desperate need for help. And suddenly, without warning, in the midst of the darkness there was this blinding light. And out of that light a voice spoke to me.

I don't need to remind you of the details of that conversation but I do want you to sense the tone. I need you to grasp the feeling and emotion that were pouring over me like oil on troubled waters. Here was someone who knew what I had done and what I was going to do. Here was someone who had a complete and total understanding of the atrocities I was going to work in the name of the Law as a direct strike at the heart of the faith that his followers were expressing. He knew of my pre-emptive attack on his embryonic message of love triumphant. And despite all my threats and determination to destroy him he was still reaching out to me.

That took me to a very dark place at the heart of the light that now surrounded me. I was immersed in his concern, bathed in his compassion, enfolded in his love, and all I could do was to cling to the old ways – the simple black and white, follow the Law, do what is right, ways. I couldn't cope with having my hatred being met with love. I didn't understand how someone I wanted to see destroyed wanted to see me saved. I had nothing left but the darkness I chose to cling to at the centre of the light.

We all want to cling to the familiar. We all want to walk the well trodden paths. We all want to do what we know is right because it's what we always do. Sometimes it is all we have. In the dust on that road I could feel all that slipping away as I tried to hold on to it. But it was leaving me like sand slipping through my fingers. Finally, despite all my best efforts, his love was triumphant. The darkness slipped away and all that was left was the blinding light of the love of Christ.

I still couldn't see the way forward. I still needed the help of others to find a safe path. I was still lost in the darkness of being without direction until a helping hand came and showed me the way. First it was my old friends who led me in my time of crisis to a safe place to wait for help. Then it was Ananias who came unwillingly and reluctantly to assist his enemy because his Lord had commanded it. And that was the start of my new journey.

I had hated with a living hatred and now I love with an all consuming love. The Law which had been my life has been replaced with love. The law sustained the synagogues where I once lived and worked. This love has redeemed the world where I now serve.

It's not been easy. I have been opposed and persecuted at many points along the way. I've had to escape from my enemies with the help of my friends and the Lord's grace. And I have had to endure all sorts of punishment when the escape has been impossible. But I have always known the loving, guiding, hand of the Lord because he chose to reach out to me in love when all I could do was to act in fear, anger and hate.

On that road, surrounded by darkness, I was blinded by the light. Now that light fills my world and I am called to lead others towards it for their own encounter with the God of Love.

Planting New Communities to Grow in Faith

After the extraordinary events in Damascus I just wanted to get away from it all. I wanted time to think and reflect on what had happened. My world had been turned upside down, inside out. And at the centre of all this turmoil was the cross.

For so long this had appeared to me and my fellow Jewish leaders a symbol of our victory over the followers of the Way. We had overcome this upstart prophet and destroyed his teaching. Now it was the symbol of his victory. I could see that through it God was reaching out to the world and reconnecting it directly to himself. That's what the free will sacrifice of his son meant. That's why I made a free will sacrifice of my own – to take his message to others – to the world.

When I came out of my self imposed isolation in the desert and returned to society I went to Antioch. Actually I was taken there by my friend Barnabus. I couldn't believe the contrast with the stillness and the emptiness I had been living amid.

I was in the third largest city in the Roman Empire – important, bustling and attractive to men of power as well as those seeking the same. But we had gone there because it was home to a large Jewish community. There were not only those who had grown up in that area but also many who had fled from Jerusalem following the execution of Stephen. You can imagine the welcome I got!

But they were not the only ones worshipping in the synagogues. There were those of status in the community who, while they wanted to adhere to the faith, didn't want to undergo a full conversion to Judaism. Most of these people were Greek speakers and they were some of the first who heard the Good News from my lips.

I told them how my life had been focussed on the Law. I told them how the synagogues and the whole of the Jewish faith were sustained by that Law. Then I told them how the Law had been replaced by love. And I told them how that love had redeemed not only me but also the whole world. The same redemption was available to them.

As you might expect this did not go down too well with the Jewish leaders. Even more so when they realised that I was not preaching a "Jews only" message. So it was not long before we were forced to meet some where other than at the synagogues. In the end we constructed our own meeting place and all those who believed could meet together in that building. We called that building our church and those outside of our fellowship even had a name for us.

They called us Christians. They meant it as an insult but we wore it as a label of honour.

We were still mainly Jews – us early Christians. We had no written texts of our own. We shared a simple creed: Jesus is Lord. We looked at the writings of the Prophets and how their words spoke to us about Jesus. And we also had something in common with all our Jewish brothers and sisters.

We had the Law – the Torah. All Jews have that in common – even the Pharisees and the Sadducees share that. We Christians were no different. It was the way we interpreted the Law that set us apart then - and now.

Soon it was clear that we were going to need our own liturgy. – our own interpretation on the Law. And I guess it has fallen to me to create it. Perhaps all these letters | have written – often hurriedly dictated in a few spare moments – will one day be collected together and form a record of the earliest thinking and teaching of our sect – our community – our fellowship?

But the events in Antioch were to set the pattern for my church plating missions wherever I went. Maybe it will serve as a model for you if you choose to do likewise.

First I would go to meet the people where they were. This was usually the synagogue. There I would be recognised as a Pharisee and a Rabbi, so I was often invited to speak at the meetings. While they were pleased with my oratory, often asking me to speak on more than one occasion, some of the more conservative "old guard" disliked what they heard. This is because I usually moved on to the second stage.

I would talk and debate with all that I met. I would inform them of the love of God shown to them through the life of Jesus. I would challenge them to follow his teachings. In this way I hoped to make new disciples.

The next stage was usually forced upon me. The more converts I made, the greater the opposition would become. In the end we would have to set up another meeting place. Some of these were in private homes, some in hired halls. Sometimes we even met in caves! But here at least we had control over when we met. I usually made sure it was at times suitable to all the believers – free or slaves. Often the siesta hours in the middle of the day when everyone rested were best.

The final stage was to establish a local organisation where everyone had their part to play. Some were preachers, some were teachers, some performed other duties. However, everyone was valued. Once this stage was reached it was time for me to move and start again somewhere new.

Endless Journeys

It was only the peaceful state of the Empire that enabled me to travel so freely. We sometimes despise the presence of so many troops but it is their very presence that makes travel safe. If for this reason alone we still have a duty, an obligation of our faith even, to respect authority. Of course, I had the additional advantages of being a Roman citizen – and being able to speak Greek.

As for me for many years home was where the baggage was. Our Lord predicted this for all his followers. Those who knew him personally tell me he often compared his own life to that of the birds of the air. They may have nests in which to rest but he would have no where to lay his head. If that is the life he led why should I seek anything different?

For many of my journeys I travelled alone or with one or two trusted companions. We always had little baggage. When we arrived in a new place it was always at the synagogue we were recognised – but as a scholar and teacher of the Law and not for who I was. My life was usually spent in isolation, unlike our Lord's. He was almost always surrounded by crowds.

But I would talk to the people as he did. Amongst those of the faith I found a great expectation of the second coming of our Lord. He said he would return. I found those who used this as an argument for not working. I used to point out to them that our lives are full of endings. Each day has an end. Almost everything is temporary but a Christian's eyes should be fixed on the eternal. We need to be sober people and not get carried away with what is to come so that we neglect what is.

I had many disappointments where my words went unheeded. In the worst of circumstances the Good News that I proclaimed about the truth of our Lord Jesus Christ was ridiculed. Never the less in spite of all these difficulties people still turned to the Lord. I rejoice in each conversion. I trust that you will continue to see such encouragement in your ministry.

My Ending

For now it is time to address this most difficult of subjects – My ending.

The events that have led me to this began in Corinth. In the usual way the locals had turned against my preaching, condemning me alongside all those who shared my faith. They were determined to take matters into their own hands and to close my mouth forever.

The matter drew the attention of Proconsul Gallo. Through his influence the matter was brought before Governor Felix. He heard the evidence and dismissed it all. He clearly stated that there was no case to be answered and in this way was speaking for Rome. However, it was clear that this was not good enough for those who opposed my teaching. Fearing for my safety he continued to hold me in protective custody.

After a while it became clear that these were not the full facts of the matter. It appeared that Felix was prepared to let me go – as long as I saw that he was rewarded for his trouble. I became impatient to be about my Lord's work and so made a formal, direct, appeal to Rome. As a Roman citizen I had a right to be heard by the Emperor. And so events were put into motion that have brought me to this place.

It was not an easy journey. We were even shipwrecked off Malta. Luckily the Lord saw me through to this place. And this is truly remarkable when you consider the events that have brought me here. 30 years ago our fellowship was a small group of frustrated and dispirited men in an obscure part of the Empire. They were clustered together more in fear than in hope outside Jerusalem. But the message went out from there. I played my part in that growth – as did others. The Good News spread around the provinces of the Mediterranean. Now it has reached its climax. I, as an apostle, to the Gentiles am free to teach and preach the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ at the heart of civilization here in Rome.

But here, too, there is opposition. This opposition is better organised than the other that I have confronted. It also has the ear of the ultimate power which it is turning against me. This time I fear there will be no escape over city walls in the dark of the night. This time my life will end. And waiting for execution certainly does concentrate the mind!

So, what should my final words be to you all? What is my last, and, I hope, lasting message?

My life has been dedicated to the truth and that has governed my every thought and action. When I set out on this journey I never believed I would come to my end before our Lord returned. Many of you – maybe all of you – are of the same opinion. We all expected the world would end and Christ would return in majesty. This now looks unlikely in the little time I have left. I will have to leave you with that fire of expectation in your hearts to ignite a new generation of followers so that the whole world may know of the love of our Lord.

People have said that my teachings condemn us all to be murderers or burglars or crooks. Some even accuse me of saying we all have perverted hearts and think of nothing but matters sexual. This is not the case. We are not totally depraved, incapable of responding to any good impulses. We are capable of responding to freely given love.

And the truth is much deeper than that. When jealousy spoils friendship, vanity for something destroys the good we've done, love converts into lust, or judgement is distorted by self interest we damage ourselves. If we are mean to others we depreciate the efforts of others. If we become fond of flattery or resent taking the blame then we make matters worse. In the end we find ourselves having fine ideals but never beginning to practise them.

These are the ways that we turn away from the teachings of our Lord and turn away from God.

You have a choice to live in the Law or in Faith. It is always simpler and easier to live to a set of rules. These are always black and white. But life isn't black and white – it's always shades of grey. Faith works with those shades of grey. The Law – any law – will enslave you. Faith and the Spirit will set you free, as it has done me.

In my time others offered to make me a god. But, like you, I am only a man and would aspire to little else. I have wanted only to a relationship with God through Jesus Christ which has granted me all that I have needed, desired and sought. I encourage you to do the same.

Afterword:

As Paul finished writing the last part of this letter, the Roman guards came to take him to the place of execution. He went peacefully, almost willingly, for he knew that his Risen Lord was waiting to embrace him as a good and faithful servant. The letter was left on his writing table. One of the guards came back later to clear out his room. He had been ordered to destroy anything that might contain revolutionary or reactionary thoughts or comment. He found the letter. As a simple man he was not sure if it met the criteria that had been set for him. Therefore he destroyed it to be on the safe side.

Paul's last letter was written but never sent.

Section 3 Pieces for Several Voices

Parables¹ Holy Tales With a Twist

How the Show Came About

For some years now I have lead a team of people who have presented the Civic celebrations in Coventry of Saint George's Day. The centrepiece of that is a street theatre presentation of the legend in the main shopping street in the city centre. Before the performance in 2006 I wanted to create another piece that said more about truth and legend.

In conversation afterwards, my business partner told me of a church that she had heard who commissioned a story telling circus troop to present the Parable of the Prodigal Son as an entertainment. It was so good for everyone - audience, performers and the commissioning churches - that when the circus asked if there were any more stories like that one a retelling of the Good Samaritan was proposed.

The circus group bolted the two together. On his way home the Prodigal Son got mugged and was helped by a Good Samaritan. It didn't take Helen and I long to add in the Lost Coin and the project that became this script was born.

We're still finding extra parables Jesus told so this script is changing as they get added in. Please feel free to do the same. If you are planning you own production there are scripts available from me in a more usual format with some notes at the end that explain some of the jokes and other things that might not otherwise be clear. As for the truth this show contains, I'll leave you to find it for yourself.

Prologue: Introduction

- Vicar: Dearly beloved. We are gathered here today to explore the wisdom imparted to us by our Lord through his use of parables. For as he, himself, did say, quoting the great prophet Isaiah: "By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them."
- Narrator 1: What are you going on about?
- Vicar: Parables.
- Narrator 1: I thought parables were stories with a moral that were easy to understand.
- Vicar: That's right.
- Narrator 1: Well, I didn't understand one word of what you said.
- Vicar: If you can do any better why don't you?
- Narrator 1: Alright. I will ...

Act One: The Prodigal Good Samaritan

- Narrator 1: ... Once upon a time there was a farmer:
- Father: How do.
- Narrator 1: He had two sons.
- Sons: How do.
- Narrator 1: The elder son worked hard. He got up with the sun:
- Eldest: Ho hum. The sun's up and so must I be.

1

Parables is available as a separate play script from the author upon request.

Narrator 1: He went out into the fields and didn't come home until sunset. He didn't even stop for lunch!

Father: Eldest! Time for lunch!

Eldest: No time, father. I've got another 20 or 30 fields to plough before nightfall.

Narrator 1: The younger son was different. He didn't get up very early and enjoyed a late breakfast before having elevenses. Then he did an hour's work before he stopped for lunch.

Father: Youngest! Time for lunch!

Youngest: Thank you, father. That's enough for one day.

Narrator 1: After lunch he had a nap before his afternoon's work - which also lasted an hour. Then he stayed sat down at the table and waited for his brother to return home so that they could eat dinner.

Father: Evening, eldest.

Eldest: Evening father.

Narrator 1: Despite the differences between these two sons, their father loved them both ...

Father: I love you both!

Eldest: And I love you father!

Youngest: Get off ... (Narrator coughs) ... O.K. Likewise man.

Narrator 1: So it was a sad day when the younger son came to his father and said:

Youngest: Father, I'm fed up with all the long hours I have to work ...

Eldest: Long hours? Work??

Youngest: ... so I'd like you to give me my share of the farm now, in cash, so that I can go and make my fortune elsewhere.

Father: But son, are you sure? Life is very different in the cruel world out there. It's nothing like as easy as life on the farm.

Youngest: Easy? Easy? You think lying about in bed until 11 in the morning is easy? There's all the noise of the people working out there to distract me.

Father: That's true.

Youngest: And I have to hang around all afternoon after lunch waiting for you to finish what ever it is that you do in the fields before I can eat my evening meal.

Eldest: (Sarcastically): Well, pardon me. I'll just have to work faster.

Youngest: Well, see that you do - and a little bit quieter in the morning as well!

Eldest: Why you ...

Father: Boys! Stop it! ... Son, you know I love you and I don't want to lose either of you. Please stay here with us on the family farm.

Youngest: If you love me, you'll do what I ask. Give me my share of the inheritance now and let me make my own way in the wide world.

Narrator 1: And so it was that nothing the father could say would dissuade his youngest son. The father loved him and, in the end, gave in to his request - even though he knew that no good would come of it.

Father: Mark my words - no good will come of it!

Narrator 1: So the younger son took his money and set off for the city, leaving his older brother to toil in the fields from dawn to dusk and the father to pine for his lost son.

Eldest: I'd better get back to the ploughing, sowing, reaping and mowing.

Father: I'll better get on with the pining for your younger brother. Pine! Pine! Pine! Pine!

Narrator 1: So it came to pass the young man went to the nearby large town and immediately started having lots of fun. Because he had lots of money all sorts of people attached themselves to him - to help him have a good time - and to spend his money.

Girl: Hallo big boy, do you want to see what I can do with my ruby red lips and my lily white hands?

Youngest: What did you say?

Girl: I said do you want to see what I can do with my ruby Red lips and my lily white hands?

Man: Do you want to buy some good stuff? Really make you feel better?

Youngest: I'd rather see what she can do with her ruby red lips and her lily white hands.

Girl: It'll cost you.

Youngest hands over some money.

Girl: (flicking lips with fingers) Blub, blubber, blubber, blub.

Youngest: (to Man): What you've got must be better than that.

Youngest hands over some money. Man hands a small white packet. Youngest sniffs the powder from the packet and sneezes.

Youngest: Hey. This is pepper!

Man: So what? Really got you going hasn't it?

Narrator 1: And so it came to pass that one of these was a confidence trickster and he decided that he would speed up the separation of the money from the farmer's son:

Con Man: Pst! Come over here where no one can hear me.

Youngest: How will I know what you're talking about if that's the case?

Con Man: Come here. Now, listen carefully. I know of this field for sale. But this is not just any old field. In the middle of this field, there is hidden a treasure of great worth.

Youngest: That's very nice. Thank you for the information but what's it got to do with me?

Con Man: If you were to buy the field, then what would you have?

Youngest: A field.

Con Man: And the treasure of great worth.

Youngest: Wow! I'd be rich! .. Wait a minute, why don't you buy the field for yourself? Then you'd have the treasure.

Con Man: I don't have the money.

Youngest: Fair enough. How much is the field?

Con Man: How much have you got left?

Youngest: (counts money): 127 shekles.

Con Man: Why, there's a coincidence. That's exactly the cost of the field!

Narrator 1: So the deal was done and the field was purchased and the young man began to look for the treasure. No matter where he dug, there was not a thing to be found - except dirt. Slowly reality began to dawn on our hero:

Youngest: I've been had! I'm going looking for the man who arranged all this! I want my money back!

Narrator 1: And that's just what he did. Imagine his surprise when he found the confidence trickster drinking with the previous owner of the field as if they had been friends forever. The young man realised that he had been tricked by both of them and hauled the con man off to appear before the local judge.

Youngest: (dragging in the Con Man): Judge! Judge! I want my money back! I've been tricked!

Judge: Silence in court! I'm dealing with this other matter! Sit down and wait your turn! ... Now, good woman, you have been here day after day for many days now trying to get me to attend to your case.

Widow: Give me my rights!

Judge: Yes, yes, I've heard all that, but as I was about to say ...

Widow: Give me my rights!

Judge: But you've not provided me with the proper incentives ...

Youngest: What's he on about? Incentives?

Narrator 1: Bribes.

Youngest: Oh.

Judge: Silence in court! I will have no further interruptions in my court! ... Now, where was I? Ah Yes. Now, my good woman ...

Widow: Give me my rights!

Judge: As I was about to say ...

Widow: Give me my rights!

Judge: If you'll just give me a moment ...

Widow: I won't. Give me my rights - now!

Judge: (Losing it): Listen to me. If you let me finish a sentence I'll deal with this matter.

Widow: Give me my ...

Judge: Ah. ...(Widow goes to speak) ...Ah. ... As I was saying. While you may not have provided me with the proper incentives, I have decided that in order to overcome your persistence and to enable me to get on with more profitable - I mean - important cases, I will rule on this matter.

Widow: Give me my rights!

Judge: You shall have your widow's rights. Your constant badgering me has won the day for you. Next case.

Narrator 1: (To youngest): That's you.

Youngest: If it please your honour ...

Judge: You don't appear to have presented the proper incentives for me to hear your case.

Youngest: That's because he stole it all off me. I promise I'll pay you afterwards.

Judge: Very well. Give me the facts of the case.

Narrator 1: And so our hero told the corrupt judge how the “business man” with him had conned him out of his money.

Youngest: so despite what he said wherever I dug in that field I could find no treasure whatsoever!

Judge: I have listened patiently to your story and this is my judgement. I’ve heard it all before. There was this merchant who had been promised a jewel of great worth who had sold everything to possess it. He said he’d been conned as well. (Con Man looks guilty.) My judgement in that case was: “This affair has given you something that is of value beyond the cost of a jewel of great worth, or even a field with a hidden treasure. This matter has taught you very valuable lessons - you can’t get something for nothing, trust no-one and keep your hands on your purse strings. This is valuable knowledge and life experience. So the people who worked this confidence trick upon you deserve what you paid them as a suitable fee. There is no case to answer.” Talking about fees, mine is 5 gold coins.

Narrator 1: Now some of you out there might think is not a very fair outcome for the youngest son - and that we might just be learning the wrong lesson from all this. But bear with us - the story is not yet over and we’ll be coming back to the field with the hidden treasure before the end of it. But for now, back to the courtroom:

Judge: I said, that will be five gold coins please.

Youngest: But I have no money.

Judge: Well, I’ll have that coat and those shoes instead! (Youngest hands over the items) Now, get out of my court before I fine you your shirt for wasting more of my time.

Youngest leaves.

Con Man: (Handing over some coins) Thank you for your unbiased opinion, your honour.

Judge: Any time, old friend. Any time.

Narrator 1: When they saw that the young man had nothing left, all his new friends deserted him. He was alone and destitute - a stranger in a strange land. He looked around for something to do - in the vain hope of getting a few coins with which to buy a little food:

Youngest: Excuse me sir? Can I have a job as a street sweeper?

Boss: Of course you can. 2 shekles a week. You can start today.

Youngest: Where do I get my brush?

Boss: You want me to supply a brush? What do you think this is? A public service?

Youngest: No sir. No one would ever think that. Keeping the streets clean will never be part of the council’s job. ... I know. I’ll sell my shirt to buy a brush!

Narrator 1: And he did just that. But then, on the first day on the job, disaster happened:

Youngest: Oh no! My brush is broken! What am I going to do now?

Boss: No brush - no job.

Narrator 1: And so our hero found a new position in a subway:

Youngest: Can you spare a little change, please?

Narrator 1: But no-one would. With starvation stared him in the face, he had an idea:

Youngest: I am a fool. Even the animals on my father’s farm are fed more than I’ve got - and they’re fed each day.

While kitchen slops and acorns are not the best of fodder, it's more than I'm getting at the moment. I will go home and hide out amongst my father's flocks. At least that way I won't be hungry any more.

Narrator 1: And so he left the big bad town and started to make his way home. On the way back he met some bandits. ... (Bandits attack Youngest) ... They set upon him. He was beaten and broken and robbed of his last possessions. They even made off with his jeans. He was left for dead in the dust! Not long after the incident a Do-Gooder came along:

Do Gooder: Oh you poor boy! I must help you. I must do some good! I know, I'll organise a sale of work! Roll up! Roll up! Come and buy! All to benefit the poor and needy!

TV Crew: Hi! We're from Good News TV. We heard you were doing good and wanted to cover the story. What are you doing?

Do Gooder: I'm helping this poor young man here who has fallen foul of these troubled and violent times.

TV Crew: What's in it for you?

Do Gooder: Absolutely nothing. All profits go straight to the poor and needy. I'm just taking a mere 97% to cover "Administration".

TV Crew: Well, first we've got to get emotion filled footage that'll melt the hardest heart. ... (action to make Youngest look even more pathetic) ... Why don't we make it a TV appeal? If you come with us we'll broadcast the news of what you're doing and ask people to send us money as well. We'll only take 3% for our trouble.

Narrator 1: Which is what they did - leaving nothing for our hero lying in the dust. Next to come along was a No Win, No Fee lawyer who knew a dead cert of a case when he saw one:

Lawyer: I've got to find the bandits who attacked this young man! ... Excuse me, sir, are you one of them?

Bandit: What if I am?

Lawyer: Well, I see a clear cut case.

Bandit: We didn't do anything wrong. And all we got was some jeans. You're getting nothing out of us.

Lawyer: No. You've got the wrong idea. I'm not talking about getting anything off you - I'm talking about getting something for you.

Bandit: What do you mean?

Lawyer: Well, there's compensation for the damage to your clubs and cudgels - not to mention the emotional damage from coming away from the scene of the crime with only a pair of jeans to show for it!

Bandit: That sounds great! Where do we sign?

Narrator 1: And so off they went to court to, claim off the public purse. And still our hero lay in the dust, bleeding, battered and bruised. Then the worst possible thing that could happen to him came to pass. The next person down the road was the worst possible person to choose this time to turn up. This was a member of the most hated and despised group for miles around. Yes, it was an Aston Villa supporter!²

Villa Fan: Here I go, here I go, here I go! ... What do I have here, then? Is it my hated enemy - a Coventry City fan, all helpless at my feet? Shall I put the boot in while he's down? No. That wouldn't be fair. And, after all, we are bound together by the love of football! I'll help him get better so we can have a fair fight in the future!

Narrator 1: And that's what he did. He helped the young man to his feet, gave him his spare jeans and placed him on the back of his own donkey ...

Cast: Donkey?

2

Aston Villa and Coventry City are traditionally great rivals as football clubs. The clubs should be changed to meet local circumstances.

Narrator 1: That's what it says .. donkey.

Villa Fan: But I haven't got a donkey.

Narrator 1: Well, you have to improvise, won't you? Just be thankful it not all that stuff about camels and the eye of a needle!

Action

Narrator 1: As I was saying: He helped the young man to his feet, gave him his spare jeans, placed him on the back of his own donkey and took him to the nearby inn where he bought him refreshments.

Villa Fan: Innkeeper! I want you to take good care of this poor victim of crime which is the hallmark of our modern day society. Offer him the best hospitality this fine establishment can provide so that his wounds may be healed and his injuries mend.

Inn Keeper: Are you sure? You're an Aston Villa fan and they are not known for their kindness to men such as this one.

Villa Fan: Yes. I am sure even though he is my hated enemy. Let him stay here until he is fully recovered and, when I pass this way again after the fight ... I mean, the match ... I will settle your bill.

Inn Keeper: How do I know I can trust you. After all, you are an Aston Villa fan.

Villa Fan: You've still got your front windows, haven't you?

Inn Keeper: Well, if you put it that way ... Come here, my good man. Sit here while I get you something to eat and drink.

Youngest: Thank you. Thank you. That's very kind of you.

Inn Keeper: Anything to keep my windows!

Narrator 1: So there the young man sat, regaining his strength before continuing on his way home.

Inn Keeper's Wife: Out of my way. Out of my way. Come on. Get up. I want to look where you're sitting.

Inn Keeper's Wife is madly searching for something.

Youngest: What's going on?

Inn Keeper: She's lost it.

Youngest: I can tell. Is she always like this? Bet it's hard on your regular customers.

Inn Keeper: No. No. She's lost IT.

Youngest: Oh. Lost what?

Inn Keeper: Well, she started the day with 10 silver coins and a few minutes ago, when she came to count them, there were only 9. Now she's looking for the lost coin.

Inn Keeper's Wife: Woe, woe and thrice woe. I must find it. Every one is so precious! It must be here somewhere.

Inn Keeper: She'll be sweeping the floor next!

Inn Keeper's Wife starts sweeping the floor.

Inn Keeper: Told you.

Inn Keeper winks at youngest, takes a coin out of his pocket and places it on the floor.

Inn Keeper: Darling. Is this it?

Inn Keeper's Wife: Yes. Oh, thank you, thank you. Praise the Lord - that which was lost has been found! Drinks on the house and let's all have a party!

Wife exits, overjoyed.

Inn Keeper: My fault really. I borrowed the coin in order to pay the milk man this morning and had forgotten to put it back.

Inn Keeper's Wife: (off): Darling! Do you want to come and join the party?

Narrator 1: Not wanting to intrude on this private celebration, the young man continued on his way home.

Youngest: I don't know why I'm bothering. My father will have forgotten all about me.

Narrator 1: Let's see shall we?

Father: Pine! Pine! Pine!

Narrator 1: Nope. Seems safe to say that he's still missing you. Either that or he's gone into the telegraph pole business.

Father: Pine! Pine! Pine! I miss my youngest son. I do hope that he is well. Nearly every day I come and stand here, looking for him coming down the road. ... But wait! What is that I see coming in the distance?

Narrator 1: Where?

Father: There.

Narrator 1: I can't see anything.

Father: It's my youngest son. I'm sure it is.

Narrator 1: Actually he's coming from over there.

Father: Oh. ... Yes, there he is! My son!! (Runs towards him)

Youngest: Wait a minute Dad.

Father: No. No. I've missed you. I must embrace you.

Youngest: Oh no you don't. ... You've got to listen to me.

Father: Then let me at least look at you. ... What are you wearing?

Youngest: Jeans.

Father: But they're so ... so ... big ... and dirty.

Youngest: They're all I've got.

Father: (Shouting off): Can I have a set of new clothes for my youngest son please!

Clothes arrive.

Youngest: But I'm not worthy of these clothes.

Father: Nonsense! Now let me embrace you. ... But wait! How thin you are looking.

Youngest: That's because I've not had a lot to eat recently.

Father: (Shouting off): Start cooking my youngest son's favourite meal! Peanut butter chillie with rice!

Youngest: Chips.

Father: (Shouting off): Make that peanut butter chillie with chips!

Youngest: But I'm not worthy of such cooking.

Father: Nonsense! Now let me embrace you!

Youngest: Oh, alright then.

Father: My son! (embraces - notices smell, shout off): Run a bath for my youngest son!

Youngest: But father, much as I need a bath - and food - and clothes - I'm not worthy of all these gifts. I took my inheritance and wasted it. Let me be the lowest of your servants. Forget that I was ever your son.

Father: Nonsense!. You are my son. Nothing can ever take that away. You were lost and now you are found again. And I want to welcome you back! Let's have a party!

Father and Youngest exit arm in arm.

Narrator 1: Now, as fate and the story teller's craft would have it, it was round about now that the older brother came back from the fields.

Eldest: I'm fed up!

Narrator 1: He was not a happy bunny.

Eldest: All day long I've been searching over the hills looking for the one missing sheep out of the 100 that make up the flock that is the farm's main source of income.

Narrator 1: He was definitely not happy.

Eldest: I've walked over hill and through valley. I have pushed through bushes that have scratched me. I've waded streams that have soaked me. I've stumbled over rocks that bruised me.

Narrator 1: In fact, he was very unhappy.

Eldest: But I found the missing sheep!

Narrator 1: Unhappy but triumphant!

Eldest: And then all the way home, with the sheep wrapped round my shoulders, the ungrateful beast ss...

Narrator 1: Careful now!

Eldest: ... sweated all over me and my best working clothes!

Narrator 1: He's upset. Ah! He's more upset than that! Ah!

Eldest: But wait! Who is this I see before me, wearing my father's finest clothes, feasting on my father's finest food and smelling of my father's finest bath oils? It is my youngest brother! But he left home, taking his share of his inheritance with him. How come he's been given all this as well?

Youngest: Hi, bro.

Eldest: Hi yourself. Why have you got all this lot then? Didn't you have enough when you went off with your share of the farm?

Youngest: True. But I lost all that. Father gave me this lot as well because I had nothing.

Eldest: That's not fair! I've been traipsing all over the place all day looking for the one missing sheep because each and every one is important and I come home to this! Father!

Father: Yes, my eldest son? What is it? Have you come to share my joy at your brother's return?

Eldest: No I haven't. He had his share and he tells me that he's spent it all. Now you go and give him even more! It's not fair!

Father: You may be right that it's not fair, but I love you both. I'd do the same for you. Cant you see that your brother was lost and is now found again? Surely we can embrace him in love?

Eldest: It's not fair.

Narrator 1: But the father wouldn't let it go at that:

Father: Look, my son, love isn't just about doing what's fair. Sometimes it about doing things that should and must be done - even when it doesn't seem fair. Forget the money and look at your brother. Do you love him?

Eldest: I suppose so.

Father: That's why you put up with him lying in bed all morning.

Eldest: (reluctantly): Probably.

Father: And only working an hour or so each day.

Eldest: (cautiously): Yes

Father: And you've missed him too, haven't you?

Eldest: (pause): Remember the day when he helped me separate the sheep from the goats?

Father: When you were thirsty he gave you a drink.

Eldest: When I was hungry he gave me some food. I never did thank him for it.

Father: No time like the present, then. Come on

Narrator 1: Finally they embraced and all went in and had a party. From that day forward happiness replaced the sadness that had filled the farm. They all prospered from this sharing of love for one another. ... But that was not the end of the tale. Remember the field that the younger brother sold everything he had to buy because it contained a treasure of great worth? Remember how he dug all over it looking for the treasure - and couldn't find it? Well, just as the party got into full swing, who should come along but an executive from an oil company:

Oil Man: Mac. I'm in oil.

Narrator 1: So are sardines!

Oil Man: I've got some news for you, Mac.

Youngest: My name's not Mac but what's your news?

Oil Man: You bought a field a while back. We've been investigating it. Deep under the field there were untold reserves of oil. Enough to make the you and your whole family rich.

Narrator 1: And that's the moral of this tale. When you find something that is beyond price, you have to risk everything to obtain it, and you have to be ready to go on digging deeper until you find it. But never give up. Because there is always someone ready to love you with a father's love, and there are always those to bring you to the party - even if one of them is an Aston Villa supporter!

Link 1: All this talk about farming reminds me of another story.

Link 2: Why don't you tell that one then?

Act Two: To Be A Farmer's Boy:

Narrator 2: O.K., I will. There was once a nobleman of high estate:

Roderick: Sir Woderick Wobertson of Wupert Hall.

Narrator 2: That's Sir Roderick Robertson. One day he was called away from his lands:

Herald: Sir Roderick Robertson?

Roderick: That's me.

Herald: I am commanded by my master and yours to ask you to come with me to the capital so that a great honour might be conferred upon you.

Roderick: That is wonderful. But as I'm going to be away for some time let me make arrangements so that my estates may continue to prosper while I am away.

Herald: Very well.

Roderick: Servants! I am going to be away for some time in the capital. While I'm away I wish that my estates continue to prosper. So, I'm going to give you, my most trusted servants, some cash. Use it wisely and I will reward you according to your actions upon my return.

Servants: Thank you master.

Roderick: Thomas!

Thomas: Yes master?

Roderick: Here are 10 gold coins. Use them wisely.

Thomas: Yes master. I will.

Roderick: Richard!

Richard: Yes master?

Roderick: Here are 5 gold coins. Use them wisely.

Richard: I will try, master.

Roderick: Harold!

Harold: Yes my lord?

Roderick: All I have left are these 2 gold coins but I'm sure that you'll do well with these.

Harold: I'll do my best, my lord. No-one can expect any more than that.

Roderick: We'll see what I think when I get back, won't we?

Harold: Yes master.

Roderick: And so, my faithful servants, I take my leave of you. Work hard and show a healthy profit.

Servants: We will master. Farewell!

Roderick: Farewell!

Narrator 2: And so the servants thought what they should do with their money:

Thomas: I don't want to get my hands dirty. I've got quite a bit of ready cash here. I'll make some investments and make the money work for me instead!

Investment 1: Here's a pretty thing.

Thomas: What is it?

Investment 1: It's a necklace for your favourite daughter.

Thomas: But I don't have a favourite daughter - and it doesn't sound like a very fair swap in any case.

Investment 2: You don't want to put your money into that. This is much more of a money making opportunity.

Sunshades for asses.

- Investment 3: You want what I've got to offer. It's bound to turn a profit. Foot wipes.
- Investment 2: Don't listen to him. No-one needs foot wipes. But everyone with an ass needs a sun shade in this climate. Just think of the extra work you can get out of a shaded ass.
- Investment 1: Just imagine her walking into a room and all the heads turning to see how fine her neck looks!
- Investment 3: No more need for towels and bowls of water. Welcome your guests with a quick wipe of one of these.
- Investment 1: And the secret is that the look is everything.
- Investment 2: Made from the finest scrap glass especially smoked for me by Jacob the kipper maker ...
- Investment 1: Rock crystals hewn from the quarry ...
- Investment 3: Papyrus fragments discarded as second rate and reformed to give the perfect product ...
- Investment 2: To protect the eyes ...
- Investment 1: To grace the neck of a fair maiden ...
- Investment 3: To wipe the feet of nobleman and beggar alike ...
- Thomas: Stop it. You don't have to compete for my money. I've got enough to support all of your ventures.
- Investments: Oh!?
- Thomas: Yes. But before I give you the cash, I want a clear understanding between us. I work for a very hard master who always expects his debts to be paid. I'm going to adopt the same policy. From these contracts that my clever lawyer has drawn up you'll see that whatever happens you have to treat my money as a loan. Make a profit or lose everything I'll still expect to be repaid.
- Investments: Oh.
- Thomas: Right. How much do you want me to risk?
- Investment 1: I'll take 4 gold coins.
- Thomas hands over 4 coins.
- Investment 2: Just 3 gold for me.
- Thomas hands over 3 coins.
- Investment 3: All I need is 2 coins for the initial stock.
- Thomas: And that leaves me 1 gold coin for me to put into buying a wine press. Don't forget! We'll share any profits but I want my investment back whatever happens.
- Narrator 2: What do you want with a wine press? Surely you're not going to get your hands dirty actually making wine?
- Thomas: Of course not. Every year there are lots of grapes and not enough wine presses. I'll let others use my press as long as they give me some of their wine - which I'll sell at a profit! They'll do all the work, and I'll get the cash.
- Narrator 2: And so Thomas sat back and counted his profits and losses while waiting until the master returned. ... Meanwhile Richard, being a more practical man, decided to put his money into agriculture. After all, that's how his master made his money!
- Richard: I'm going to grow corn, just like the master!
- Thomas: So what's first then?

Richard: I guess I'd better go and buy some seed.

Narrator 2: So, off he went to the shop to buy some seed:

Shop Keeper: Good day, kind sir. How may I help you?

Richard: I'd like some seed.

Shop Keeper: Well, we've got all sorts. We've got pansies, daisies, dahlias, delphiniums, nasturtiums, hollyhocks, sunflowers, cornflowers ...

Richard: No. I don't want flower seeds.

Shop Keeper: Oh, it'll be vegetables you'll be after then. We've got beans, peas, carrots, lettuce, radishes, onions, parsnips, cress, mustard, celery, tomatoes, marrow

Richard: Not vegetables either! ... I want some something to grow in fields - you know, just like Sir Roderick uses.

Shop Keeper: Corn.

Richard: No it's not. It's the truth.

Shop Keeper: No. What you want is corn.

Richard: Oh, I see.

Shop Keeper: Right. How much do you want?

Richard: I don't know ... I've got 5 gold coins.

Shop Keeper takes coins and gives seed - a lot of seed.

Narrator 2: And so he took the seed into the fields and threw it about with wild abandon. He had no idea what he was doing and didn't care where it fell.

Richard: That bit's easy.

Narrator 2: Some of it fell on the path that ran through the middle of the field. Some of it fell in amongst the nettles that grew in a patch...

Thomas: You're doing the parable of the sower, aren't?

Narrator 2: What if I am?

Thomas: Well, there's no need to. Everybody knows that one.

Narrator 2: I bet they don't.

Thomas: I bet they do. You do, don't you?

Audience response.

Thomas (or Narrator 2 if appropriate): You see. I told you.

Narrator 2: No-one knows it that well.

Thomas: I do!

Narrator 2: O.K. then, what comes next?

Thomas: You've just done the nettles bit?

Narrator 2: Yes. That's the ones that look a little prickly and likely to sting to you.

Thomas: There's some of those out there. But it's the stony ground next.

Narrator 2: Very good. And where did most of the seed land?

Thomas: Most of it fell in the good soil that made up the greater part of the field. There's some of that out there too!

Narrator 2: I hope so - else we're wasting our time tonight!

Thomas: That's true.

Narrator 2: So. After the seed was sown, what happened next?

Thomas: Birds swooped down and destroyed the seed on the path.

Narrator 2: Bit tricky to do birds in here. Can you think of any other ruthless and destructive force of nature?

Thomas: Boy scouts?

Narrator 2: They'll do. They could stamp all over the path!

Scouts: Here we go a wandering, along this wide firm path.

Narrator 2: The rest will just have to wait for the right conditions and then?

Thomas: The shoots in the nettles get strangled.

Narrator 2: Which ones out there did you say were prickly?

Thomas: In a minute because those shoots in the stony ground get frizzled and I've got to get my sun block on.

Narrator 2: That's all very well for you but I've got a parable to finish. What am I going to use for the crops that grow from the seeds in the good ground?

Thomas: That lot?

Narrator 2: Good idea! Everybody stand up - you're the crops growing. O.K.? ... But most of the seed had landed in the good soil. There it sprouted and grew and flourished. ... Come on now, all you good ground, wave in the wind. ... So much so that when Richard came back a week or so later he was amazed to find his field full of waving green shoots.

Richard: Why are they all waving at me?

Narrator 2: It's your field full of corn almost ready to harvest.

Richard: I did well didn't I?

Narrator 2: He felt very pleased and patted himself on the back.

Richard: Well, well, well, that's a job well done. There's no trick to this farming business. But one thing puzzles me. How on earth did those little seeds turn into this lot?

Narrator 2: I don't think anything on earth had anything to do with it.

Richard: What do you mean?

Narrator 2: Think about it. ... Oh, all right. You lot can sit down now - and stop waving! ... And while he thinks about that, let's see how Thomas is getting on with his wine press:

Thomas: (Accepting bottles of wine): Thank you ... Thank you ... That'll do nicely, thank you.

Narrator 2: Meanwhile, back at the corn field:

Neighbour: Howdy.

Richard: Howdy.

Neighbour: Nice field of corn.

Richard: Yes. And I've got no idea where it came from. ... Your field doesn't look so hot.

Neighbour: Yeah. ... I got sold a bad batch of seed - full of weeds.

Richard: That's tough. ... Well, there's not much more that I can do here. It seems to be growing alright by itself. Soon it'll be time to harvest it and I'll make a lot of money! See you later.

Neighbour: Yeah. See you later. ..(Richard exits).. Make a lot of money will you? While I'm left with a field full of weeds. It's not fair! It's not fair!! I know. I'll get some of the seeds from the weeds and sow them amongst his "nice field of corn". That'll teach him!

Narrator 2: And he did just that. He stood downwind of Richard's field and shook the weeds he'd gathered from the field. Their seeds all came out and blown by the wind fell everywhere amongst the growing crop. It didn't take long for the weed seed to germinate and grow up amongst the crop. When Richard came back he was horrified!

Richard: Oh no! What on earth has happened? Where did all this lot come from?

Neighbour: I haven't got the faintest idea!

Old Man: How do.

Neighbour/Richard: How do.

Old Man: Got a problem?

Richard: I don't know much about farming but I had this field of corn. It was lovely. It was going along fine, each day the shoots were getting taller. Then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, I came today and the field's full of weeds!

Old Man: Hmm. Weeds don't just come out of nowhere. My guess is that someone has sabotaged your field.

Richard: I can't think of anyone who would do that!

Neighbour: I'll be off then. See you later.

Richard: What do I do now? How do I get rid of these weeds?

Old Man: Think of the field as the sea. Think of the crop as fish that you can eat and the weeds as the nasty stuff no-one can eat. When you harvest the sea, you keep the good stuff and throw the bad stuff back.

Richard: What?

Old Man: I said: Think of the field as the sea

Richard: Yes, yes, I know what you said. I'm just trying to make sense out of it. Does that mean I should just pull the weeds up and throw them away?

Old Man: No. You'll just pull up the crop with the weeds and have nothing. Leave it until the harvest. Then you can sort the good from the bad, keeping one and burning the other.

Richard: Oh. Got it. But, while you're here, can I have some advice about this fig tree?

Old Man: What about it?

Richard: It's very old and not produced any fruit in years.

Old Man: I can see that.

Richard: Should I pull it up and burn it?

Old Man: Not everything that is old and worn out should be discarded as useless. You should fertilize it, water it well, and give it one more chance. If it doesn't produce figs, then you should tear it up and throw it on the fire.

Richard: (Laughing): If only my master was like that, giving those who let him down another chance! And at least the birds will have somewhere to build their nests.

Old Man: If you're worried about the birds, you should plant one of these.

Richard: One of what?

Old Man: These. It's a mustard seed.

Richard: It's very small.

Old Man: I know. It's one of the smallest seeds known.

Richard: And it will grow into a huge tree?

Old Man: Yes. Watch.

Plants seed. Pantomime beanstalk.

Richard: Wow! That's a surprise! ... (nest added) ... And the birds like it too!

Old Man: You know little things can make a big difference. Like a tiny bit of yeast can make a lot of beer or a tiny light on top of a hill can be seen for miles around and guide all to a safe harbour.

Richard: I see what you mean. Come on, let's go and get a drink while we wait for harvest!

Narrator 2: And they did just that. ... Meanwhile, back at the wine press:

Thomas: (Accepting bottles of wine): Thank you ... Thank you ... That'll do nicely, thank you.

Narrator 2: But time passed and Richard's crops continued to grow. The ears ripened and the harvest time came.

Worker 1: That's a nice field of ripe corn.

Richard: Yes.

Worker 1: Just right for harvest.

Richard: Is it?

Worker 1: Yes. You ought to gather it in.

Richard: Right. ... But I don't know what to do.

Worker 1: I do.

Richard: Oh. I don't suppose you'll help me get it in will you?

Worker 1: I don't suppose you'll agree to pay me to do so will you?

Richard: Would 5 silver coins be enough?

Worker 1: That's a deal!!

Narrator 2: And so the worker began to gather the harvest in. But soon it became clear that there were not enough workers. So he called to his eldest son:

Richard: Son!

Eldest Son: Yes, father?

Richard: Will you go to the market place and recruit some more help?

Eldest Son: Yes father, I shall.

Narrator 2: Halfway back to town the eldest son realised he was hot and thirsty.

Eldest Son: Blow this for a game of soldiers. I'm not going into town and hiring more workers. I'm off to Thomas's wine press.

Thomas: Hiya. How's things?

Eldest Son: Too hot. Got any cool wine?

Thomas: Of course.

Eldest Son: Cheers!

Narrator 2: And there he settled down with several long, cool drinks. Meanwhile back at the fields, Richard was equally hot and bothered.

Richard: I'm getting all hot and bothered. I don't think my eldest son is going to come back with any workers. Number 2 son!

Number 2 Son: Yes father?

Richard: I asked your brother to go to the market place to hire some more workers and he hasn't come back. I think something must have happened to him.

Number 2 Son: Knowing him as I do my bet that he's over at Thomas's with a cool bottle of wine.

Richard: Well, will you go to the market place and hire some more workers for me?

Number 2 Son: No way. What's good enough for my brother, is good enough for me. I'm off to Thomas's!

Narrator 2: On the way, though, he thought about everything that his father had done for him and realised he was not being fair.

Number 2 Son: I'm not being fair. My father has looked after me all these years and asked for nothing in return. I will go to the market and hire some more workers! ... Excuse me, do you know anything about harvesting corn?

Worker 2: A little.

Number 2 Son: Well, will you come and help my father harvest a field full?

Worker 2: How much?

Number 2 Son: I've just told you - a field full.

Worker 2: No. How much for me?

Number 2 Son: Oh. How about 5 silver coins?

Worker 2: That'll do nicely!

Narrator 2: And so it came to pass that the two brothers arrived back at the harvest at the same time:

Eldest Son: (drunkenly) I'm sorry father, I didn't make it to the market place and couldn't find any workers.

Number 2 Son: I'm sorry father, I just had to do it, even though I said I wouldn't. I've got you this worker.

Richard: I don't which one of you to praise and which one to curse.

Eldest Son: Well, I said I would go.

Number 2 Son: And I actually went.

Speechless Richard waves them both back to work in the fields, along with the extra worker.

Narrator 2: The day was drawing to a close when Richard could see that he was going to need even more help if the job was going to be finished before sunset.

Richard: Keep at it lads. I'm going to get some more help! ... Excuse me, sir, do you know anything about harvesting corn?

Worker 3: Yes, sir. I'm an expert field hand.

Richard: Would you come and help me get my harvest in today for 5 silver coins?

Worker 3: Cash?

Richard: Cash in hand as long as the work is finished tonight.

Worker 3: Done.

Narrator 2: And with all this help the work was completed on time.

The workers line up to be paid.

Richard: There's 5 silver coins for you. ... And 5 silver coins for you ... And five silver coins for you What's the matter?

Worker 1: You given them the same as me.

Worker 2: Yeah, I've done more work than him (Worker 3) but you've paid us the same.

Worker 3: I'm quite happy, thank you.

Worker 1: Well, I'm not. All day long I've slaved in the hot sun getting this crop in. You've just turned up at the last minute once the heat of the day is past - and you've got the same as me for nothing like the work!

Worker 2: Yeah. I did a full half day's work for these 5 coins, not just an hour or so like you.

Worker 1: Half a day? I did the full day. I want what I deserve.

Richard: O.K. O.K. How much were you promised?

Worker 1: 5 silver coins.

Richard: And you?

Worker 2: 5 silver coins.

Richard: And you?

Worker 3: The same - 5 silver coins and I'm quite happy thank you very much.

Richard: And how much have I give you?

Workers 1+2: (mumbling): 5 silver coins.

Richard: I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that.

Workers 1+2: (reluctantly): 5 silver coins.

Worker 3: And I've got 5 silver coins as well - and I'm quite happy.

Richard: Well, I kept the bargain I made with you. I have delivered what I promised you. I offered the same reward no matter how long the service. All of you accepted the offer and that's an end to it.

Worker 1: Well, at least we've got 5 silver coins more than when we started.

Worker 2: I suppose so. Come on, let's go to Thomas's and celebrate.

Worker 1: Good idea.

Workers 1 and 2 leave.

Worker 3: (To Richard): I just want you to know I'm quite happy.
(To Narrator): I'm quite happy you know.

Narrator 2: Thank you. Meanwhile back at the wine press:

Thomas: (Accepting bottles of wine): Thank you ... Thank you ... That'll do nicely, thank you.

Narrator 2: And all this leaves us with Harold. He also decided to go into farming with his master's money. But, instead of doing it himself, he hired some others to do it for him:

Harold: Excuse me?

Farmer: How do.

Harold: Are you a farmer?

Farmer: Now, what makes you think that?

Harold: I don't know. Just something about what you're wearing and the piece of straw sticking out of your mouth.

Farmer: Now, if you're going to get personal ...

Harold: No, no. I didn't mean any offence.

Farmer: That's alright then. ... What can I do for you?

Harold: If I gave you these 2 gold coins, would you grow a field of wheat for me, harvest it, take it to market and give me all the money you get for it?

Farmer: (after a pause): Of course I will!

Narrator 2: Oh no you won't!

Farmer: Oh yes I will!

Narrator 2: On no you won't.

Farmer: Oh yes I will - and I'm going to get on with it because this is meant to be a parable not a pantomime.

Money is exchanged.

Narrator 2: Having done the deal this meant that Harold could have more time doing what he was best at - doing absolutely nothing. When harvest time came round, he was still lazing around. He decided that it was time for him to collect his profits and sent one of the lesser servants to collect them. Unfortunately he had chosen bad business partners and there was no way they were going to share the profits with him:

Servant: Good day, my man.

Farmer: How do.

Servant: My associate Harold - you know the one who gave you the 2 gold coins to grow this crop for him - has sent me to collect what is due to him.

Farmer: Well, I ain't going to give it him.

Servant: Why not?

Farmer: Because I'm a thief. I'm going to keep it all myself.

Servant: Well, I'm just going to have to go back and tell him that.

Farmer: Oh no you don't.

Servant: Oh yes I will.

Narrator 2: Don't start that again. Get on with it.

Farmer: Right! This is for you!

Farmer kills body and hides it.

Narrator 2: When the first servant didn't come back Harold sent another to claim his profit. That one met the same fate. Servant after servant was sent on this fool's errand and the ditch where the farmer was hiding the bodies was getting quite full. In the end, having run out of willing servants, Harold sent his own son:

Harold: Son.

Son: Yes father?

Harold: Can you go down to the fields and collect what's owed?

Son: Yes father.

Narrator 2: He met the same fate and now Harold didn't know what to do! Right in the middle of all this Sir Roderick came back.

Roderick: I'm back!

Narrator 2: He took all three of the servants by surprise:

Thomas: That made me jump!

Richard: I wasn't expecting you now!

Harold: That was a surprise.

Roderick: I know. I thought it would be a good idea to turn up unannounced. Now it's time for the inquisition.

Harold: I wasn't expecting that.

Roderick: No-one expects the inquisition. ... Thomas. I left you with most. How did you get on?

Thomas: Well, as you can see from these audited accounts that I have had prepared for you, things have turned out rather well. Not only have I recovered my initial investment, I have made a profit equal to it. I have the pleasure in presenting you with 20 gold coins.

Roderick: Well done, my faithful servant. I am very pleased. And to show you how pleased I am, I'm going to let you keep all your profits!

Thomas: Thank you sir.

Roderick: Richard - you're next.

Richard: If you'd just come over this way with me, master, you will see that this barn is full of corn. When I sell this on the open market I should be left with a clear profit of 5 gold coins - that in addition to the 5 you left me in the first place.

Roderick: Well done, my faithful servant. I am very pleased. And to show you how pleased I am, I'm going to let you keep all your profits!

Richard: Thank you sir.

Roderick: Harold - you're next. ... I said, Harold - you're next. ... What's the matter? What are you doing?

Harold: I'm packing master.

Roderick: Why on earth would you be packing?

Harold: Because I took your money and sort of didn't do anything with it. I tried to get others to do it for me and now there's nothing left. I've lost the lot - including my own son. Knowing you as we all do, you're going to be angry and drive me from your estates - or worse. I'm sorry master. Please forgive me.

Roderick: Forgive you? Forgive you? I trust you with 2 of my hard won gold coins and you waste them. And you want me to forgive you?

Harold: I'm really, really sorry.

Roderick: Well, I'll tell you what I'm going to do.

Harold: Go on. I'm ready for it.

Roderick: Of course I'm going to forgive you, my penitent servant. I am very pleased. And to show you how pleased I am, I'm going to let you keep all your profits!

Harold: But there are no profits.

Roderick: There you go then.

Thomas: You can have my wine press - if that's all right with you sir?

Roderick: Everyone deserves a second chance. (To Harold) Try and do better this time.

Harold: I will, sir.

Roderick: Oh, and Thomas?

Thomas: Yes, Sir Roderick?

Roderick: I'm not such an ogre over debts as people think, am I?

Thomas: No, Sir Roderick.

Exit all save Thomas who reflects on this.

Enter Investment 1

Thomas: Ah! The necklace salesman! Have you come at last to pay back my investments and give me my fair share of the profits?

Investment 1: Oh, good sir, please forgive me. The plan has failed completely. The crystals I used were salt crystals and when it rained the necklaces simply dissolved. Like them, I'm all washed up.

Thomas: What's that to me? You should have known that salt is only good for adding flavour to things. And I have a watertight and legally binding contract with you that ensures that you will pay me what you owe.

Investment 1: But I have no money.

Thomas: And still you wear a cloak on your back (Enter Investment 2) ... And here's another one I was looking for!

Investment 2: Well, I wasn't looking for you.

Thomas: Don't tell me, things haven't been going too well with you either.

Investment 2: How did you guess? It seems that if you fit asses with sun glasses they think it's night and stop working all together. They just sit down and fall asleep.

Thomas: So, you've got no money for me either.

Investment 2: As a matter of fact ... No.

Investment 3: (Entering): Woe, woe and thrice woe!

Thomas: Stand over there with that one while I sort this one out.

Investment 3: I'm ruined! The rabbis have ruled that my foot wipes are unclean!

Thomas: Well they would be after wiping all those dirty feet.

Investment 3: No. They've ruled that they are unclean before anyone uses them to wipe feet. Something to do with getting the papyrus off cuts from the Egyptians. Now I haven't got a shekkel to my name.

Thomas: And here I stand with 3 legally binding contracts. And all 3 of you know how strict my master is for the letter of the law.

Investment 1: You're not going to take the cloak of my back, are you?

Investment 2: Or the roof over my head?

Investment 3: Or what little food still remains in my larder on which to feed my wife and 7 children? ... Come to think about it, would you be interested in a wife and 7 children?

Thomas: No, I'm going to do what my master would do in these circumstances.

Investment 2: It is the roof.

Investment 1: And my cloak.

Investment 3: How about just the wife then?

Thomas: No. None of these. I'm going to ... forgive you, just as my master has forgiven those who have failed him.

Narrator 2: This made these debtors respect Thomas for his generosity. In later years, when he grew old and needed their help, they remembered this act and helped him. In fact, the more that Thomas had forgiven, the more help those debtors gave him in the future! Harold thought he'd try and sort out things as well. He got some of his mates together and went after the crooks who had robbed him of his income. This led to an almighty punch up and attracted the attention of the authorities. Everyone was arrested and hauled before the judge - which just happened to be Sir Roderick:

Sir Roderick: What am I going to do with you Harold? I let you off the debt when I could have had you beaten and driven from my home. Instead of showing similar mercy to those who had wronged you, you went after them. Shall I now give you what you deserve? Shall I have you beaten and driven from my estates?

Harold: No, master, please forgive me. I've learnt my lessons this time and won't do anything like this ever again.

Narrator 2: And Sir Roderick forgave his penitent servant and, as the master always rewards a penitent heart, he took them all off for a party!

Link 3: Hey! That sounds like another story!

Link 4: It is!

Act Three: Party Time:

Narrator 3: Once there was this man who planned a great feast:

Host: Steward!

Steward: Yes master?

Host: I am planning to hold a feast to honour one who is a very special person. You are to make plans

immediately.

Steward: Yes master, I will.

Host: And steward.

Steward: Yes master?

Host: Have some of my servants take these invitations out to the great and good of the town as I wish them to join me in honouring this person.

Steward: I will see that it is done.

Narrator 3: Unfortunately most of the people in the town didn't like the host, so they made up all sorts of excuses.

Servant 1: My master has sent me to invite you to a party to honour a very special person.

Baldy: Sorry. I can't come. I'm washing my hair.

Servant 1: My master has sent me to invite you to a party to honour a very special person.

Guest 2: I'm sorry. I can't come. I've got to watch some paint dry.

Servant 1: My master has sent me to invite you to a party to honour a very special person.

Guest 3: (wearing party hat, etc.): I don't do parties - especially his.

Servant 1: My master has sent me to invite you to a party to honour a very special person.

Guest 4: Come in for a minute while I get ready.

Narrator 3: Some of those invited were so upset that they beat up the servants.

Servant 1 staggers back onto stage.

Guest 4: And don't come back here with improper suggestions like that ever again!

Guest 5: Yes? What do you want?

Servant 1: My master has sent me to invite you to a party to honour a very special person.

Narrator 3: Some are even killed ...

Guest 5 stabs Servant 1 with a sword who staggers around the stage before finally dying.

Narrator 3: ... eventually. Meanwhile back at the party place:

Host: I don't understand it. Why haven't my guests started to arrive? Don't they want to join me in honouring this person?

Steward: Master?

Host: Yes steward?

Steward: We've got a problem. No body of note or position in this town wants to come to your party. Some of your servants have been beaten up - one has been killed.

Host: Right! That's the last time I'm going to invite them to anything I'm planning. Send out the servants again - not the one that's dead, of course - and invite those people who you would not expect me to invite. I'm determined to see this person honoured.

Steward: It shall be done.

Narrator 3: And so, once more, the servants went out onto the streets with their master's invitations.

Servant 2: My master has sent me to invite you to a party to honour a very special person.

Lawyer: Oh thank you, thank you. I knew he would get round to me in the end. I am truly worthy of such an honour. Maybe even the party is being held in my honour. Can you tell me servant? Is this why you have invited me, Henry Grabbit, senior partner in Swindle, Twist and Grabbitt, solicitors?

Servant 2: You're Henry Grabbitt, solicitor?

Lawyer: Yes, that's right.

Servant 2: Not Gerry the builder?

Lawyer: No. He lives next door.

Servant 2: Sorry, my mistake. ... (goes next door) ... My master has sent me to invite you to a party to honour a very special person.

Lawyer: You can't be inviting HIM. He's a builder and not a very good or trustworthy one at that!

Builder: Yeah. I'm not very trustworthy. Some have even told me I'm so bad I even give cowboy builders a bad name. ... You haven't come about that house I built upon the sand have you?

Servant 2: No, but you are Gerry the builder?

Builder: Yes.

Servant 2: Well, the invitation is for you.

Lawyer: And you've nothing for the house of Grabbit the lawyer?

Servant 2: As a matter of fact I do have something for that house.

Lawyer: Oh, thank you, thank you. I knew there was a mistake. I'll over look your error my man. Hand it over.

Servant 2: Here you are.

Lawyer: But this isn't for me. It's for Larazus.

Servant 2: That's right.

Lawyer: That's the old beggar man who sits by my gate. On a good day he gets the scraps off my table. Your master can't possibly want him at the party!

Servant 2: That's the name on the invitation. ... Why don't you come along and sit outside my master's gate? Maybe Lazarus will let you have some of his scraps.

Narrator 3: Finally the guests started to arrive at the party:

Host: Welcome, welcome. Lazarus my old friend welcome. Come at sit at table. ... No, not that seat. You are most welcome but that seat is reserved for the guest of honour. Let me find you a seat more fitting to your status. Doctor Dave! What are you doing sitting way down here?

Doctor Dave: I'm not important. This is a fitting place for someone like me.

Host: Nonsense! Stand up immediately and give this seat to Lazarus here. ... Now, you come with me and sit here. This is a much more fitting place. And you. What do you think you're wearing at this special feast?

Ill Dressed: What I was wearing when I was told to come here. I made no special arrangements.

Host: Well, I'll make some for you. Bind him hand and foot and throw him in the cellar!

Steward: Master?

Host: Yes?

Steward: Your good friend, Sebastian Jacobson, has sent word that he needs your help. Shall I tell the messenger that you can't come at the moment?

Host: No. Nothing is more important to me than a friend in need. What has happened?

Steward: The messenger says he has fallen into a ditch while helping his partially sighted neighbour go into town to the market.

Host: He's blind as a bat himself! It was all bound to end in tears. I'll go and help at once.

Steward: But what about the party?

Host: Give my guests some more wine while they wait. Continue with the preparations while I'm gone. Have the cooks light the barbecues but warn them that it may be some time before I return so they should take care. They should make sure they have enough coals to cook the meal at that time.

Narrator 3: So the Steward did just that while his master went off to help his friend in need. Unfortunately one of the cooks was not as cautious as the other.

Cook 1: Pour on the lighting fuel! Let's get it going! The higher the flames the hotter the coals!

Cook 2: You should take more care. The hotter the coals the quicker they burn and we don't know when the master will return. We should only burn what is necessary to keep the fire going until he comes back.

Cook 1: Nonsense! I've got plenty of coals.

Cook 2: You'll be sorry!

Cook 1: It'll be alright.

Narrator 3: But it wasn't. Long before the master returned, his fire had gone out. ... And when the master did return, he was not very pleased:

Host: What's all this then? It looks like you've lost your flames.

Cook 1: Yes, master. I have. All I've got left is ash.

Host: Well, you won't cook much on that, will you?

Cook 1: No master.

Host: Well then, you're like your coals.

Cook 1: What do you mean?

Host: You're fired.

Narrator 3: And so, at last, it was time for the party.

Host: Friends! Welcome my honoured guest!

Steward: I don't see him. Where is he?

Host: It's you.

Steward: What do you mean, it's me?

Host: All the years you have worked for me you have listened to my instructions and tried your hardest to fulfil them. You have been honest, hard working and never once complained. You've even found time to help others in their work and encourage those along the way who were perhaps finding their duties and obligations a little wearisome at the time. You have always been respectful of others no matter what their station. In fact you have behaved exactly as I have asked you to and how I try to act myself. Well done, my good and faithful servant - take the seat of honour!

All: Well done! ... Speech! ... Hurrah!

Steward: Thank you, master, you do me great honour. Before I sit down I'd like to propose a toast. One of my master's friends is not with us tonight. I'm sure he would have come but he was always so busy. He felt that he had to have everything just right. He felt that everything had to be in its place and his future secured. He was such a special friend of my master that I took the invitation for him to join us to at the party myself. But it was too late. He'd worn himself out with all the storing and sorting, preparing and securing, and he died early this morning - before I could give him his invitation. I'm sure he knew about it but he was so busy that without that invitation he was bound to miss out on the party. And that's what he did. He missed out on the party. So I'd like to propose a toast to absent friends.

All: Absent friends!

Narrator 3: And that brings us to final moral to all these stories. The Parables that Jesus used were not meant to be theological arguments to think deeply about. They were meant to be simple stories that were fun to listen to but with a message for all who heard them. That's what we've tried to bring you in this retelling of the stories of Jesus today. If you've heard something in these tales that speaks to you - or says something about your situation, don't miss out on your opportunity. Don't be an "absent friend".

Host: Remember: You have to be ready to go on digging deeper until you find the truth. But never give up. Because there is always someone ready to love you with a father's love, and there are always those along the way to help you. There are even people here tonight longing to talk with you.

Steward: Put aside all the other things that you're doing because you think they're more important - all the storing and sorting, preparing and securing. Don't delay, act today. Reach out and accept your invitation.

Host: Then your ears will hear, and your eyes will see, and you'll make it to the feast prepared for you and all human kind. After all, everyone is invited to this party!

All: Cheers!!

The Well at the Sheep Gate

John 5: 1-18

One **MAN** sits dejected.

He is one among many sitting around a pool - a large well. All are infirm or handicapped in some way. Some look anxiously, expectantly, at the water of the pool.

That water lies still, stirred only by the breeze in the sunlight. There is an overall air of resignation tinged with desperate hope.

Suddenly we hear that the waters are stirred by something - perhaps a rush of gas from under the surface. The **CRIPPLES** are moved into frantic activity:

Voice 1: Quick! Now!

Voice 2: Help me!

Voice 3: It's got to be me!

There is a desperate rush to enter the water. Those with friends and carers lead the way ahead of the rest. As they enter the water, hope is seen on the faces. When nothing seems to happen though sadness and resignation returns.

The **DEJECTED MAN**, who got nowhere near the pool in the rush, is seen with sagging shoulders and is clearly more dejected than before. Crouched on all fours his head drops and stares hopelessly at the floor.

From his point of view, two feet enter his line of sight. He looks up and sees the face of **JESUS**:

JESUS: What's the matter?

DEJECTED MAN: I was too late again.

JESUS: Too late for what?

DEJECTED MAN: It's the pool. It'll heal anything. The first person who gets in when the angel's stirred the surface is healed. But I've been here for years, waiting for my chance. But I'm all on my own. There's no-one here to help me. So I don't get into the water and that means I don't have a chance to get healed. It's just not fair ...

JESUS: Do you want to be healed?

There is a pause. The **DEJECTED MAN** is not only clearly thinking about it, something is trying to happen.

DEJECTED MAN: Why do you think I lie here day after day? There's no shelter here you know. I'm drenched every time it rains, frozen every time the wind blows out of the east. As for the camels, I've lost count the number of times they've trod on me. Of course I want to be healed. And I would have been by now if there was anyone who cared about me. All it needs is one person to show that they care - by doing some something - like helping me into the pool when the water bubbles - that's all it would take ...

JESUS: Get up. Pick up that mat and walk away from here.

There is a moment. The **DEJECTED MAN** pauses as something passes into him from **JESUS**. The moment passes. The **DEJECTED MAN** rises, walks back to his sleeping mat, rolls it up and turns to walk away from the pool. **JESUS** watches him go before turning away himself in another direction.

The **DEJECTED MAN** is making his slow way when he is stopped by one of two **GUARDS**:

GUARD: Oi! You!

DEJECTED MAN: Who? Me?

GUARD: Yes, you. Don't you know what day it is?

GUARD 2: Yeah. Don't you know what day it is?

The **DEJECTED MAN** thinks for a moment.

DEJECTED MAN: As a matter of fact, I don't Tuesday?

The GUARDS are not impressed.

GUARD: No. It's the Sabbath.

DEJECTED MAN: The Sabbath? Thank you very much. I'll try to remember in the future.

The DEJECTED MAN turns to go.

GUARD: Not so fast.

GUARD 2: Yeah. Not so fast.

DEJECTED MAN: Yes?

The GUARD indicates the sleeping mat being carried by the DEJECTED MAN.

GUARD: What's that?

DEJECTED MAN: This? It's a sleeping mat.

GUARD: It's a sleeping mat, Trevor.

GUARD 2: A sleeping mat, Hamish.

DEJECTED MAN: What's wrong with that?

GUARD: Carrying a sleeping mat on the Sabbath is work and that's forbidden under the law. You're nicked mate!

The GUARDS pick up the DEJECTED MAN under the armpits and start to frog march him down the street. The sleeping mat falls to the street and is taken by an OPPORTUNIST THIEF in the background.

DEJECTED MAN: But ... But ... It's not my fault. I've been a cripple for ages. I've been sat on that mat by the healing pool by the Sheep Gate for years. It's not my fault I've lost track of the days of the week. And in any case it's that man's fault. He told me to do it.

The GUARDS stop dead in their tracks. The DEJECTED MAN is dropped into a heap on the street. The GUARDS exchange looks that say "Ah! Ha! Bigger fish to fry!". The GUARDS haul the DEJECTED MAN back to his feet.

GUARD: Man? What man?

DEJECTED MAN: The one who told me I could walk.

GUARD 2: Healing on the Sabbath! Now that **is** serious!

GUARD: (To Guard 2): Yeah. Let's get that one!
(To Dejected Man): Where is he?

DEJECTED MAN: (Searching frantically): He's ... He's ... I don't know. I can't see him.

GUARD 2: Where did you last see him?

DEJECTED MAN: At the gate ... The Sheep Gate ... By the pool ... The healing pool.

GUARD: Let's go!

The GUARDS drop the DEJECTED MAN once more. Again he ends up in a heap on the street. The GUARDS rush off to search for the long gone JESUS. The DEJECTED MAN picks himself up, dusts himself down and looks around amid the jostling crowd. He is about to move off when he remembers something. He looks around once more before addressing the unconcerned crowd:

DEJECTED MAN: Alright. Which one of you low life has nicked my sleeping mat?

Or: Another Point of View:

Everyone Needs a Helping Hand

John 5: 1-18

TOM and DICK crawl in from opposite sides of the church to take position lying on the steps to the sanctuary area on either side of the centre aisle.

TOM: Morning Dick

DICK: Morning Tom. Seems to be quite a few in Church this morning.

TOM: Yes. And I saw lots of new shoes. Must be loads of new people in as well.

DICK: Either that or the women have been out buying for the winter!

They both laugh. There is a pause.

TOM: Carpet's looking O.K.

DICK: Yeah. Must be the new vacuum cleaner.

TOM: Or someone's found out how to empty the bag.

There is another pause. CHILD enters from his seat and joins them, standing with his back to the congregation to confront them.

CHILD: What are you two doing?

TOM: Waiting for Harry.

DICK: He'll be along in a minute.

CHILD: No, not that. What are you two doing down there?

There is a pause while TOM and DICK consider this but, before they can formulate a reply, HARRY arrives crawling down the centre aisle.

HARRY: Sorry I'm late. Rod kept me talking. He wanted me to look at his new socks.

CHILD has moved up steps to face the 3 crawling figures.

CHILD: What is it with you three? What are you up to?

HARRY: Sorry. It's my fault. The preacher wanted me to do a reading for her and I need these two so that I can get high enough to reach the lectern.

TOM: Anything to help the service go smoothly.

DICK: Even if I'm not sure which of us is going to be on the bottom.

HARRY: Well, you two will have to sort that out. All I know is that I've got to be on top.

TOM, DICK and HARRY start to crawl towards the lectern. Before they get very far they are stopped by the CHILD:

CHILD: Oh for goodness sake. Why are adults so stupid? Why don't you just all stand up.

There is a shocked pause.

TOM: Stand up?

DICK: You mean, on our own two feet?

HARRY: And walk about like you?

CHILD: Precisely.

There is another pause while the three digest this point.

TOM: No. Couldn't possibly do that. Tried it once when I wasn't even a year old. Fell over and landed right on my bum. It hurt a lot. I'm not doing that again. I'm quite happy down here on my hands and knees thank you very much.

DICK: Yeah. Hands and knees are best. It's frightening what you're doing walking about on only **two** legs. How on earth do you manage to balance? I'd be scared of falling over all the time. And I don't like being scared so I'll stay where I'm comfortable even if it's not that nice.

HARRY: Yeah. It's comfortable down here. But Dick's right. It's not that nice. I thought about standing up - if only to save the knees of my trousers. I thought it might help me. You know, see things differently. But I don't think I can do it on my own. I'd have to ask someone to help me.

CHILD: You'd only got to ask. Here. I'll help you. Give me your hand.

TOM and DICK watch horrified as HARRY tentatively reaches out to the CHILD's hand. HARRY is helped to his feet and looks around at the new world he can now see.

HARRY: Wow! This is amazing! I never knew it was as easy as that. And it's quite safe. There's absolutely no danger of falling over and making a fool of myself. And look at all these people! They've got faces as well as shoes! I never knew that. I never knew that the world could look like this. Come on you two. Come and join us!

HARRY reaches down with his hands to help TOM and DICK rise.

TOM: No. You're not kidding me. There'll be some catch. Once he (*the CHILD*) gets you walking about like that, he'll expect you to go on doing it for ever. And I bet it'll hurt much more than my knees do now. I'm used to that pain and can live with it. I don't want any new pain. I'm out of here.

TOM crawls off down the centre aisle.

HARRY: What about you, Dick?

DICK: I'm not sure. I don't want any new pains either. I'm happy where I am, even though it's not very nice. Maybe things will be different if I stand up. Maybe I can let go of whatever it is that is holding me down here. But I'm scared. I don't think I can sort it out on my own. I need someone to help me.

CHILD: It won't hurt. We'll help.

HARRY: Yes. It'll make the pain in your knees go away. Give us your hands.

HARRY and the CHILD reach down for DICK who starts to rise. The action freezes as the narrative is taken up by LYNNE:

LYNNE: We all have something thing that is holding us down, holding us back. Often we've felt it for so long that it's become comfortable. Now we think of it more as a help, rather than a hindrance, a solution rather than a problem. We may not want to let go of it, using it as a walking stick to help us along the rough road that we have chosen to walk. We may be frightened because we think there will be no one to help us if we let go of something so important in our lives. But, as with the crawlers who chose to stand up, a whole new world waits for those who are prepared to let go of things that might be holding them back on our walk through life. And, as in the scene we have just played out before you, there is always someone waiting to lend His hand to help you overcome any problem or hurt you might have. That person's name is Jesus.

In an Upper Room
Waiting Leads to Movement

Acts 2: 1-13

a: So. What are we going to do?

Peter: I don't know. What do you want to do?

a: I don't know - what do you want to do?

b: Now don't start that again. Why does this seem familiar?

a: Because we've been round and round this circle time after time ever since he went away. We don't know what we're meant to do any more. And he put you in charge.

b: Right after saying "Go everywhere and tell everyone about me. Baptise them. Heal them. And make them all my followers."

a: So. What are we going to do?

Peter: I don't know. What do you I suppose we're going to have to do what he said.

a: Right. And how are we going to do that?

b: Well, we're going to have to get out of here for a start. That was his first instruction: Go everywhere.

Peter: OK. Follow me.

Pause

b: You don't seem to be going anywhere.

Peter: I know. It's a bit scary, that's all. You know what happen only a few weeks ago? You remember what they did? And what we did?

b: Yes. I remember.

a: But didn't he show us that there was another way? Didn't he prove it to us - not only by what he said but by what he did - and by what happened to him and us only those few weeks ago? Do you (*Peter*) remember that?

Peter: Yes. I remember.

b: So that's why we've got to do it - all of it - starting now. ... Anytime you like. ... When you're ready. ... In your own time.

a: He's scared.

Peter: Of course I bloody well scared!

b: There he goes with the oaths again!

Peter: Yes, I know. But I'm nothing but a simple fisherman so despite what he said about me I'm not cut out for this sort of thing. I can't do it without him. I can't do it on my own.

b: He never said you'd have to do it on your own.

a: That's right. He said he'd send you - us - a helper.

Peter: Sure. But where is he? Is it you?

b: No.

Peter: Or you?

a: No. You know I've been with you from the start. The helper was always going to be someone new.

Peter: So where is he? Haven't we waited long enough?

b: I guess it'll be in his own good time.

Peter: So. What do you want to do?

a: I don't know. What do you want to do?

Peter: I don't know. What do you ... Now, don't start that again. This is where we came in.

b: Maybe then, this is where we have to go out. ... After all that's what he told us to do.

Peter: Right then. Enough talking. Let's go and do something - if only catch some fish.

a: Or get ourselves killed.

b: That's sounds more likely.

Peter: That won't happen. It's a feast day. People don't get killed on feast days.

a: Don't you remember last Passover then?

b: I think we all remember that day.

Peter: We're not going to live in the past any longer. We're going out there. I've made my mind up. We've waited long enough. It's time we stopped talking and did something.

a: Ready when you are.

b: We're right behind you.

There is a pause. Peter makes a couple of false starts which first encourage and then sadden the others. He makes another attempt when suddenly the Holy Spirit comes upon them all. There is another short pause.

Peter: Everybody ready? Let's go.

Section 4 A Liturgy and Drama for Lent

Where Do I Go From Here?

Introduction:

In considering the season of preparation for Easter in 2008 the Worship Team at Earlsdon Methodist Church, Coventry, looked at what the lectionary readings could say to us. That led to the theme for each service. As all but one of the services focussed on a person I was asked to write a liturgy that used voices drawn from within the story told by each reading.

After much thought and prayer I was led to use the voice of Jesus as he reflected on the events of which he had been a recent part. The Worship Team had also wanted a question for each service that the congregation could be left with as they went out of church. Initially we tried for a different question each week. The writing I undertook led to the single question above for the whole season.

Lent 1: The wilderness and Satan:

I nearly gave in to it then. Just like anyone else I nearly gave into the temptation.

I've always known that I was special. But I didn't want to admit it to myself. I just wanted to be like anyone else growing up in our small town. I just wanted to be a normal young man. But then I had to go and do it. I had to respond to the call. I listened to my cousin John.

I went to him at the river when he was washing people clean of their sin. I went because I knew I had to. John knew it too. He wanted me to wash him clean. But I knew that was not right – it was he who had to plunge me under the water. And he did. And that's when it happened.

As I came up out of the waters it was like I was hearing a voice God – my father – saying he was pleased in me. Others say they saw a dove descend and alight on me as a sign of his favour. All that I knew was I didn't mind being different anymore. I had been filled with power and there was nothing that was beyond me. I could do anything I liked.

But I didn't know what to do. I was scared. I just wanted to get away from it all – the crowds, the responsibility, the pressure. So, like John had done before, I sought out the silence and emptiness of the wilderness. And that's when it started. The temptations. The idea of using this new found power for my ends, my selfish ends.

I could use the power to change my material position. My family and friends would never want for anything again. I could produce everything we needed out of thin air. Why, I could even turn the rocks and stones of the desert into loaves of bread if I wanted!

I thought about it I can tell you. But looking around me, even in the depths of the wilderness where I had chosen to place myself, I could see the beauty of God's Creation. I realised that there's more to life than material things. So I set aside my desire for the purely physical.

But I knew that Father God had named me beloved Son. I knew that he would take care of me. I would always be protected.

I stood in a high place and looked down into the depths. Far beyond my feet there were rocks and boulders broken by the heat and wind of the desert. If I was to fall from that height I too would be broken when I landed there. But I had no need to fear. Even if I threw myself towards that certain death I would survive. I would be bourn up as if on eagle's wings and exalted for I am the chosen one, the special one, the anointed one.

I nearly did it. I nearly let my arrogance get the better of me. I nearly gave in to that temptation. Then I remembered the voice at the river. The voice that said He was pleased with me. Was this the way to repay a grateful Father by testing His love? So I set aside my desire for immortality.

Refreshed and renewed by this latest triumph, I lifted my eyes to look about me once more. From where I was standing I could see for miles. I could see many different lands and I was aware of the people struggling within each of them.

So I thought about assuming power – political power – over all the lands. I could use my gifts to make me the leader of all the nations in the world. I could have all the other leaders bow down before me and worship me. Maybe that was the way to use my power.

Then I remembered the dove that descended on me at the river. I realised what it represented – a greater power given to me by the Father. I realised that if I abused that power by assuming world domination I would become just like all the others who

sought total power. The power that I would be wielding would corrupt me – probably totally. It wouldn't be long before I was just as hated as the other leaders were.

My personal ambition would undo all the good I wanted to do. I'd be serving the forces of darkness. And that was not the route I wanted to take. So I put aside my desire for absolute power.

Having put all these temptations behind me I felt better. Now I have come out of the desert – both physically and spiritually. I give thanks to the Father for the strength that he gave me to resist all the temptations I encountered in the wilderness. Now I am ready to begin the work that has always been appointed for me. Only one question remains.

Where do I go from here?

Lent 2: Nicodemus: Keeping Faith Young.

Well, that's a turn up for the books! I wasn't expecting him to come. I didn't think the establishment would pay any attention to the message I had to bring.

When it all began it was easy to see the people that had been chosen to carry my message. They were there, waiting, even if they didn't know it. All I had to do was to seek them out. When I met them face to face and called their names they dropped everything and followed me.

There were the fishermen – the honest, hard working, common men. They understood how their lives were intimately linked to all that was around them. By drawing on the examples in the natural world about us all, their minds were open to that fresh way of thinking. And John had even prepared the way with one or two of them. His message about my coming had caught the imagination of those who wanted change – and change for the better.

Once I had gathered those common people about me it wasn't long before others could see the difference in them. Oh sure, all the healing and other miraculous events that happened helped but it was really the change in those ordinary men that attracted most of the crowds. Every one of those who gathered at lakeside or on mountain top could identify with someone close to me.

Then, in the dark of the night, when we were resting at the end of a long day, who should come knocking at the door but Nicodemus. He's a member of the Council – the Sanhedrin. He sits at the heart of those who lead the Jewish religion. This was the man who had to come to talk to me about what I had been saying.

At first I was cautious. The questions he asked certainly wanted to get to the heart of the matter. He wanted to know all about my teaching that seemed to be making all things new. So I told him. I mean, every day I'd been out in the streets saying the same things in public so why should I say something different in private?

When I began to talk with him I expected to meet resistance. After all, he was part of the leadership charged with the preservation of the order within our faith. I expected him to be set in his ways. I guess I didn't expect to get any sort of reaction from this conservative church leader.

I was wrong. The more I talked, the more he listened. The more he listened, the more probing the questions. The more I answered them, the more that I could see that this encounter was changing him. When I talked to him about being reborn in faith I could see that he was struggling with the concept and yet was longing to embrace it for himself. For all his substance, for all his status, for all his position, for all his knowledge and understanding of the Law and the Prophets, he was still willing to think about new and fresh expressions of faith.

By the time we had finished talking it was getting light, as dawn fast approached. He hadn't fully accepted everything we had shared but he was, at least, thinking about it. He was open enough to embrace the idea of being born again into this fresh understanding. For one with his prestige at the heart of our faith that was a breakthrough.

In that grey light of dawn I knew that even if I hadn't fully made a convert, at least I had a friend at the traditional centre. I wondered where that was going to lead. I wondered what would come of that dark of the night meeting. I wondered if we would meet again. I wondered if he was asking himself the same question as me.

Where do I go from here?

Lent 3: Samaritan Woman: The inclusivity of Jesus

They told me not to do it. They told me that we were taking a risk coming this way, coming through Samaria. They told me that the people were outcasts. They were undesirables. We were to have nothing to do with them. Not that they understood what I had to do.

They told me not to stop. We had to get through the region as fast as possible. That way we'd minimize our contact with the people. That way we'd preserve our purity – keep ourselves to ourselves. That's why we were travelling in the heat of the day. That's why I got thirsty. That's why I stopped to get a drink. They didn't understand that either.

They told me not to talk to her. They said that we knew nothing about her. Not only was she one of 'them' – a Samaritan – she was at the well at totally the wrong time. No one fetches water in the heat of the day. She was obviously avoiding even her own people. Anyone could understand that, they said. They didn't understand that I knew everything about her already. Neither did she.

When I asked her for water she was aghast. She was almost afraid to let me touch the drinking cup. She didn't want me to pollute myself with any contact with her at all. She was aware of the situation and wanted to exercise compassion towards me. That's why I was able to talk with her. That's why I was able to offer her compassion of my own.

When I told her about the living water that I could offer her, she didn't understand. I felt she thought the sun must have addled my mind. She put it all down to the ravings of a sun stroked idiot. That's why she mentioned her husband. I think she did that to warn me off. To let me know there was someone looking after her.

But that opened the door. That let me tell her I wanted to look after her as well. That enabled me to tell her all that I knew about her and her situation. And that left her amazed. It blew her mind and she really wanted what I had to offer. More importantly she knew that she had to bring others to taste that same living water.

My companions didn't understand that. They couldn't grasp the idea that the message wasn't just for them, the select few, or for our people, the chosen race. They want me to be exclusive. They wanted me to keep myself just for them. They told me not to do it – not to waste my time with the outcasts of this world. But that's not going to happen.

What I bring is for all people, whatever their circumstance, whatever their race, whatever their position or standing in society. I hope that the meeting by the well in Samaria with that woman has started to show them that. After all, she understood even if they didn't.

Now, where do I go from here?

Lent 4: The Blind Man: Seeing beyond the physical disability

He wouldn't let anything get in his way. He knew what he needed and he used all his energies to get it. Nothing was going to stop him getting what I had to offer.

Not the crowd – that endless press of people who lined the roads wherever I went. Even though he was pushed to the back he still wanted to reach out to me. He was prepared to set himself apart. He was prepared to defy his friends who wanted him to suffer in silence. They didn't want him to bring attention to his infirmity. While they sympathised with his suffering they didn't believe there was anything that could be done to put things right.

He didn't even let tradition get in his way. He had been blind since birth and everyone knew that this was a curse. This disability was caused by some great sin in the past history of his family. He had been chosen to bear the stigma, the burden of that long forgotten crime. His punishment was to atone for whatever it was that had displeased God.

But all he wanted to do was to be able to see. All he wanted, for the first time in his life, was to gaze upon the beauty of a flower, the pattern of light and shade as the sun shines through the canopy of a tree, the face of a child smiling when given a treat. Was that too much to ask for? Was that too much to expect? To have something that most people take for granted?

He knew that I could give that to him. He knew the opportunity to be healed was passing him by as he sat where his friends had left him. He knew the chance to be able to see was right there in front of him. And he was prepared to make his need heard by shouting out to me.

What would you have done? If you had what he had needed, would you have kept on walking? Would you, like his friends, have been embarrassed and told him to keep silent? Would you, like the crowd, have condemned him to a life in darkness because of no act or fault of his own? Or would you have reached out and given him what he wanted so passionately?

He knew what I would do. He knew what I could do. He knew that I had to stop and help him in his need. He knew that I am prepared to reach out to all who admit their infirmity and call upon my name for their healing. And now his friends know it too. And so does the crowd. And soon the whole world will know it through their witness.

So, where do I go from here?

Lent 5: Lazarus: Power, eternal life, grief and joy:

I was not in Bethany when the news came. I was expecting it, of course, but it still came as a bit of a shock. Lazarus was ill. My very dear friend was going to die. All my instincts were to set out immediately to help him but I knew that these events had to unfold in their own way. So I waited.

Those who were with me couldn't understand what was happening. They had heard the message that had been brought and expected me to go rushing off to help. Some of them thought that I was staying away because we had been threatened with being stoned to death when we were last there. But I was waiting for the time to be right. I was waiting to know that he had died.

I felt him die. I felt his spirit leave his body. And it hurt because I knew that I could have saved him that pain. But at least the time had come at last and I gathered my friends to return to Bethany. They wanted to know why I seemed to have changed my mind. I told them what I knew and they followed expecting that all of us would join Lazarus in death.

Martha came to meet me. She accused me of betraying my friend. She told me I had abandoned him in his hour of need. This was true, even though I did not tell her that. And my pain grew. I gave her what reassurance I could and went to the place where they had laid my friend's body some four days earlier.

I couldn't believe how many people had gathered at that place. I knew we were only a short distance from Jerusalem and there were many people in the region that knew about the friendship between Lazarus and myself. It seemed that they had gathered expecting me to work some great miracle and I knew they were not going to be disappointed.

But would they understand what they were about to see? And then it struck me.

I could not do what I was about to do without having let my dear friend suffer in the way he had over the last few days. I looked around at all who gathered at his tomb. All were grieving, many were weeping. My pain was a mirror of theirs. Only there was a difference. I could have spared them all this pain. Now I could only share it. So, like them, I wept to ease my pain.

Then I acted. The time was right. When the stone at the entrance was rolled away there could be no doubt that all that lay within was a dead and lifeless body. So I did it. I challenged their certainty. I called my friend forth from his tomb.

And he came. Still wrapped in the bandages and grave clothes, still blinded by the cloth over his eyes, Lazarus came out of the darkness of death groping his way once more into the light of life. For those gathered there they could be no doubt. The Father had given me the power necessary to conquer even death itself.

With this very public act I knew that the inevitable end was approaching. Such a dramatic and total revelation of my power was bound to bring me into a final confrontation with those who opposed my Ministry. They would not accept me and would only plan for my destruction. This simple act of reaching out to a friend in need had brought me to the climax of my journey. All that was left for me to do was to show my majesty to as many people as possible before my friends once more found themselves gathered at the entrance of a tomb.

I stayed in Bethany for a while, resting and talking with those closest to me. All around me there was turmoil as people – friends and enemies – struggled to come to terms with what they had seen, with what I had done. That turmoil was nothing when compared to what was going on in my mind. I was asking myself one question over and over again:

Where do I go from here?

Lent 6: Palm Sunday: The Passion: Celebrity Cult: Human v. God

At the last the banners have been raised and the voices cheered my name as their expected saviour. Cloaks have covered the streets and palm leaves cushion the cobbles. The crowds who used to come in curiosity have lined the streets in acclamation of a long expected victory. They had come to proclaim their conquering hero. They saw me exactly as they wanted to see me. And they cheered me to the echoes, shouting 'Hosanna' to their Messiah.

All the forms had been observed. All the prophecies fulfilled. Every detail had been taken care of – even down to the donkey. There could be no doubt that I was exactly who they wanted me to be. Any minute now they expected that I would lead them to their freedom from the oppression they lived under. I was going to guide them in throwing off the yoke of the Roman occupiers.

They had waited a long time for this day. The scholars and the students of the Prophets knew it was coming. The common people felt it in their hearts. It had been promised to them by their God. I had told them that many times in my teaching. Even the Romans and their collaborators feared that this day would come. All these emotions were there, gathered by that Jerusalem roadside.

What happened next must have been a big disappointment to everyone. The mantle had been thrust upon me and yet nothing had changed. The people still suffer. The revolution has not begun. The Romans still occupy the city. Their underlings still rule the roost. There has been no armed uprising and already my reputation is beginning to tarnish.

A Saviour is only a Saviour if he is able to bring instant salvation.

It won't be long before the crowd that cheered me will turn against me. They won't be able to help themselves. Once they don't get what they expected, they'll be disappointed. That disappointment will turn to anger. They will believe that I misled them and, no matter what I actually did, they will believe that I betrayed them.

I, too, will be betrayed and be handed over into the hands of my enemies. And then the end game of this affair will begin to be played out.

Where do I go from here?

Good Friday: On the Cross

A shorter version of this reflection is used in 'Trial' below.

It hurts. As I hang here with ropes biting into my forearms, nails tearing at my wrists and ankles and blood pouring from the welts on my back and the scratches torn by the thorns pushed into my head, it hurts.

The pain began last evening when I knew it was the time to say goodbye to my friends, my companions of the last three years. I tried to make it special. I tried to make it memorable. I tried to show them just how important that meal was for them. Somehow, even after everything I had said to them, they still didn't understand what was about to happen. That's when the pain began.

It grew over the passing hours, becoming more intense as each inevitable incident came to pass. It got stronger in the garden when I faced my final personal point of decision. It got bigger when even my closest and most attentive of companions – Peter, James, John - could not stay awake with me through that fateful night. It reached an agonising climax when they came to arrest me – as that angry mob emerged out of the darkness.

There – right out in front – stood Judas. He came towards me and kissed me – betraying me with that sign of greeting that we often exchanged as friends. That hurt – not just me but the rest of us all gathered there in that garden. I could bear that pain but they could not and suddenly that night was filled with shouts, swords and a servant's blood.

Somehow the severed ear brought some sort of relief to the pain. This was familiar territory. I knew what to do in circumstances such as these. My simple act of caring and healing brought an end to the fighting. But not to my pain. For as the fighting ceased my friends fled into the night, leaving me in the hands of my enemies, hurting and alone. I didn't think it could get any worse but I was wrong.

Over the next few hours events took their inevitable course that led me from Council to Governor to King, back to Governor and to this place of execution. Stage by stage, encounter by encounter, action and reaction, my pain started to grow again. Now, as I hang here, facing an excruciating death with my family and friends looking on helplessly and my executioners gambling for my possessions, that pain is ever more intense.

It is the pain of separation. It is the pain of isolation. It is the simply being alone, totally alone.

All this started in a river. As I came up out of the water I heard that voice saying that in me he had a son with whom he was well pleased. Since then I have tried to do what he wanted me to do. I've tried to take his message to his people. With his help I have overcome the temptations that come with power, I have shown that all things can be made new – no matter what barrier of tradition, race or infirmity might seem to exclude you, I have shown that by acting in his power even death can be conquered and I have revealed my true nature to his people in triumphant procession at the very centre of their faith. And he has been with me on that journey.

But now, as the final act of my ministry is played out – the climax I committed myself to last evening is reached – he has left me. I am left all alone hanging here to die. After everything I have done, after everything I have seen and felt, all that is left is this all consuming pain of total isolation. I can't bear it any longer. My strength is gone.

Father! Father! Why have you forsaken me?!

Nothing. Only the silence, and the darkness and the pain. There is nothing I can do about any of them.

It is finished. Father! Into your hands I commit my spirit!

Where do I go from here?

Easter Day: In the Garden

I feel the sun on my face and the breeze that brushes my hair. I see the green of the leaves and the smell the scent of the flowers. I hear bird song and know that if I were to pluck a blade of grass from the ground and place it in my mouth, I would taste its sweetness on my tongue. The numbness, darkness and emptiness that replaced the pain and despair has gone. I know that I was dead and now I am alive again.

I have met Mary and spoken with her. She was so distressed that she did not recognise me. In her pain and anguish she had forgotten what she knew. She depended on only what she felt, believing that she had lost me forever. That meeting transformed her hurt to joy, her loss to triumph and she ran to tell Peter as I had asked her.

He came and I watched as he was transformed by simply finding the empty tomb. He was distraught over what he had done a few evenings ago but needed nothing more than some folded grave clothes to restore his faith in everything we had shared. I watched as he left the garden, rushing to carry the news to the rest of them. No need to meet me face to face – although the time would come for that. He knew from the simple things he had seen for himself.

That left me time to simply stand and savour the feeling of being alive again. I was in touch with the world and everything in it. I could feel my Father's presence and know his loving approval for all that was coming to pass. There's still some work to be done. There are those who still will want to see and feel for themselves. But many more will simply believe and know in faith what has come to pass because of their simple testimony.

It won't be long now. My journey on this world is almost over. From stable to carpenter's shop, from wilderness to a garden by an empty tomb, I have simply walked the path that had been prepared for me. Journey's end is in sight and soon I will be able to truly say 'It is finished'.

But I must still be about my Father's business. Now, where do I go from here?

Trial
A reflective drama for Good Friday

Cast, In order of speaking:

Narrator
Mary
John
Accuser 1
Accuser 2
Accuser 3
Accuser 4
Peter
Prosecutor
Chair
Nicodemus
Rebuff 1
Rebuff 2
Rebuff 3
Pilate
Jesus

Before the performance starts there is a video or a series of pictures of dawn playing on the screen behind the performance area. It is a cold dawn and not one full of rosy sunshine.

Narrator: It started in a garden ...

The image on the screen changes to that of a garden. Again the image is cold, reflecting a chilly start to the day.

Mary: It was cold in that garden but we were all warm inside. We'd just finished our Passover meal and it had been good. We'd eaten the bitter herbs of exile and eaten the unleavened bread. We'd shared the wine and given our thanks to the Lord for our deliverance from slavery. It had been a special time: a time of peaceful reflection at the end of a tumultuous few days. The fellowship we shared, the traditions we had observed, the services we had offered one to another, all had made last evening one of those times that you will remember fondly for a long time. Even now it still makes me feel warm inside.

John: At that meal I had been close to him. I had been seated at the centre. I watched it all unfold. Much of what we did was familiar – our people had been doing the same for many, many years. But some of it was brand new. He added a special meaning to that remembrance meal. I didn't understand much of what he said and that's despite being with him on the road for these past 3 years. I do remember him saying that this was the last meal he was going to eat with us and that he was going back to his father. I couldn't make sense of that. Why on earth did he want to go back to Nazareth? After all, they had driven him from the synagogue at the start of his ministry for what he said then. They'd probably have him stoned to death if they could hear what he was saying now! But it was difficult to take anything seriously in that upper room. I mean, the wine had been flowing freely and all our heads must have been spinning. I saw Judas leave us – I guess he wanted some fresh air – and I thought that was a good idea. When the meal was over and it was suggested that we come out into the garden we all went along with it. It was cold outside in the pre-dawn darkness but we had our cloaks and the warmth of the company that we had just shared to enfold us and keep us warm. It was good to be in the open air and the garden was peaceful.

Mary: Yes, that early morning started out peacefully enough. Most of us settled down near to the entrance where there were some rocks that still had a little of the warmth of yesterday in them. He went further in taking his closest friends with him. We were left behind in the darkness. It was nothing for us to worry about. He'd often go off with those same close friends or on his own. All we had to do was to wait and he'd come back. So we settled down amongst those rocks and waited. We chatted a little about what we had seen in the last few days – the procession he organised, the way he had turned all those wheeler dealers out of the Temple porch, the healing he had done and all the rest. It wasn't a serious discussion – just the usual after dinner chat amongst friends. There, wrapped up as we were, we didn't feel the cold – only the warmth that the evening had given to us earlier. I guess most of us started to doze as that conversation trailed away. I know soon I was fast asleep.

John: I was sleeping too. He'd taken me and a couple of others with him away from the rest. Then he'd made us wait as well as he went on alone. Like the others we had chatted about the night and the days that had gone before. And like the others as the conversation dwindled, we had succumbed to sleep wrapped in our personal cocoons of warmth. I know he had told us to stay awake. I know he had urged us to watch with him

as night turned to day. It was as if he knew what was going to happen and wanted us to see it coming. He wanted us to have at least a few moments to prepare. The next thing I knew he was standing in the middle of us. He was in an awful state – sweating, tears streaming down his face and he was laying into us for having fallen asleep. That shocked us, I can tell you. We were all wide awake after that. As he went off into the darkness again we all made the same promise. This time we were going to watch and wait as he had told us to. But it didn't turn out like that. I guess I'd drunk too much wine and eaten too much good food because it wasn't long before I was fast asleep again. I know now the others had given in as well. We were all asleep when they arrived.

Mary: As they streamed into the garden we all woke up. There were so many of them with their torches and their swords. We didn't know what was going on but anyone could see that they meant business. We got to our feet, huddled together as a group in the middle of those rocks and got ready to run for our lives. The mob – for that what it seemed to be to us – had stopped just inside the garden. The leaders seemed to be having second thoughts. They seemed uncertain as to what to do next. Then I noticed that were talking to one man in particular. He seemed to be giving orders or listening to instructions. At any rate he was at the front of them. Some sort of conclusion or plan of action was reached and that man stepped away from the rest, making his way towards the others who they could now see in their torchlight. That same torchlight lit his face and I saw that it was Judas. I guess we all must have relaxed a bit then. This wasn't a hostile mob come to get us – not with Judas at the front. He must have led these people here to help us.

John: It was the arrival of that mob which woke us all up for the second time. He'd just come back as distressed as the first time – and just as angry with us – as they started streaming into the garden. I watched as a change seemed to come over him then. He relaxed as if everything was falling into place, as if his way forward was clear to see again now. I must admit so many people with torches and swords coming after me in a garden at the dead of night made me uneasy. I wanted to run away and hide. It was only his calm reassurance that held me where I was. That was the only reason I stayed. I looked at that mob, waiting to see what they were going to do. Then I saw Judas. He was coming towards us on his own. I thought to myself 'Well, if he's with them, they must be on our side, so everything is going to be all right!' I watched as he walked right up to the master and kissed him in welcome. And that's when the chaos began.

Mary: As soon as Judas had kissed him the mob surged towards him. They were acting as one large wild animal which had identified its prey. We were all frozen to the spot as they enveloped him.

John: We saw them coming but we didn't have time to do anything. It took us all by surprise. They'd gone from friends to foes with a simple kiss. They were going to take us all and there was nothing we could do to stop them.

Mary: I think I must have screamed. I think I must have known what was going to happen next. I tried to rush forward to be with him but others held me back. They knew it was useless. There was nothing we could do in the face of such opposition.

John: Typically it was Peter who reacted first. He was waving his sword about in no time, trying to drive them away. I think it hit someone and that stopped the action for an instant. With the sight of that blood everyone stood frozen.

Mary: They were dragging him from the garden into the darkness beyond when I saw everything stop. Something had scared them – made their mission more real – and doubt had stayed their hands. Then I saw him move.

John: I watched as he bent down and picked something up from the ground. He moved towards the man who Peter had struck and put his hand at the side of his head. I'm not sure exactly what happen but I do know the blood stopped flowing.

Mary: Then that moment was past. It all became movement again and I was dragged into the shadows on the other side of the road.

John: Despite what he had done, they took him. They grabbed his arms and bound his hands. Triumphant they dragged him away from us and out of the garden.

Mary: I watched as they took him off down the road that led back to Jerusalem. I watched as the torchlight faded in the distance. I watched and I saw Peter following them at a distance.

John: I came out of the garden and found the others hiding in the shadows. They told me what they had seen – about Peter following them. So a few of us followed Peter through that pre-dawn darkness.

Mary: That's how we came here. That why we're standing here, outside these walls.

The image on the screen changes to a brazier burning with bright coals.

John: A fire burns in the courtyard and the whole place is wide awake and full of people.

Mary: There is nothing more we can do.

John: All we can do is to stand, and watch, and wait.

Mary: The fire gives warmth in the courtyard but all I can feel is the cold inside.

Narrator: It continued in a courtyard.

Peter comes into the centre and is circled by Accusers:

Accuser 1: You're that fisherman.

Accuser 2: The one from Galilee.

Accuser 3: Your and your brother.

Accuser 4: You had a family business.

Accuser 1: Doing very well for yourselves.

Accuser 2: Then you gave it all up.

Accuser 3: Just walked away from everything.

Accuser 4: All your boats.

Accuser 1: All your family.

Accuser 2: All your friends.

Accuser 3: Just because that man spoke to you.

Accuser 4: Told you to follow him.

All Accusers: You're that man from Galilee

Peter: No, I'm not. You've got the wrong man.

Accuser 1: I'm sure it's you.

Accuser 2: I'm positive I've seen you with him.

Accuser 3: When he was feeding all those people you were handing out the loaves and fishes.

Accuser 4: He was stopping at your house when they lowered that man who couldn't walk through the roof.

Accuser 1: You went up the mountains with him when he wanted to have time apart.

Accuser 2: It was your boat that he used whenever he wanted to get across the lake.

Accuser 3: Some people tell me that he's so important to you that you do everything he tells you to.

Accuser 4: I bet you'd even walk on water if he told you to!

Accuser 1: And you were at Bethany!

Accuser 2: Yes, I saw you there too.

Accuser 3: At Lazarus's house.

Accuser 4: You were right alongside him as he worked that trick of calling Lazarus out of that tomb.

Accuser 1: You're his right hand man.

Accuser 2: You're at the centre of his inner circle.

Accuser 3: He depends on you.

Accuser 4: He calls you his rock.

All Accusers: I'm sure it's you.

Peter: Look. I'm telling you. I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know the man!

Accuser 1: I don't know how you can say that!

Accuser 2: Not when I saw you walking alongside him as he rode that donkey in the procession the other day.

Accuser 3: Not when you were in the Temple Porch as he was turning over all those tables.

Accuser 4: Not when you were standing next to him as he healed all those people.

Accuser 1: Not when you were with him in the garden.

Accuser 2: You know – the garden.

Accuser 3: We surprised you.

Accuser 4: We came upon you in the dark.

Accuser 1: And we had a traitor to lead us.

Accuser 2: To show us where you all were.

Accuser 3: To pick him out for us from the rest of you.

Accuser 4: You weren't expecting that.

Accuser 1: You panicked.

Accuser 2: Started waving your sword about.

Accuser 3: Cut a slave's ear off.

Accuser 4: Hit an innocent man.

Accuser 1: A bystander simply doing his job.

Accuser 2: Standing there holding his torch.

Accuser 3: So we could see him.

Accuser 4: And you.

All Accusers: You were with him!

Peter: Damn you. Damn all of you. If I've told you once, I must have told you a thousand times. I don't know him!

As Peter is delivering this speech to his Accusers, Jesus is brought in, hand bound behind his back, between two guards. Peter ends face to face with Jesus. There is a frozen moment. Peter breaks it by rushing out past Jesus while his Accusers scatter with mocking laughter that sounds a little like crowing cocks.

The image on the screen changes to the Royal Court of Arms as you find in a Crown Court and the Council file in, followed by the

Prosecutor:

Narrator: It reached its climax before the Council.

Prosecutor: Prisoner at the bar. You are here before us to answer many charges. How do you plead?

Pause

Chair: If you remain silent we will have no choice but to take it as an admission of your guilt.

Nicodemus: How can he be expected to answer charges that he has not yet heard?

Chair: But they are well known. We have been discussing them for weeks.

Nicodemus: We have but no-one else has ever heard them.

Chair: Very well, if we must. *(To Prosecutor)* Read the charges.

Prosecutor: You are charged with attacking the special and unique status of the church and the chosen people who are the members of it. You have accused us of being too wrapped up in ourselves, in seeing God's benefit for His people being only for us and have publicly declared that we spend too much time celebrating our salvation forgetting those in the cold and the darkness who need God's light and warmth.

Rebuff 1: How stupid are you? Of course we are the chosen people. Scripture tells us so. All we have to do is to follow the rules and say the words and we'll be saved. It's all there in black and white. Surely that's something that we can be happy about? Surely it's all right to rejoice and have a celebration of our salvation? That's what it's all about, surely? Making heaven here on earth. We all want a good time in heaven so we come to church to have a good time on earth. And what of those outside? What can we do for them? As I've said it's all there in black and white and if they want to avoid eternal damnation all they've got to do is to follow the rules. There is nothing else we can do for them. If they want to join us then they've got to be like us. We don't want just anyone joining in. They've got to fit in. They've got to do what we do, dress like we do, act like we do. After all, that's what it's all about. We are God's chosen church and we are doing it the right way. Your accusation is an affront to that special status. You want to tear down the existing system and replace it with your own. That condemns you for what you are.

Chair: I agree. You want to seize power over us all for your own ends. I know you wrap your ambition up in all this talk of love for one another but everyone knows it is the pursuit of power that is at the heart of every action. And you are seeking power by overthrowing us. So, how do you plead to this charge? Are you guilty of it? *(pause)* Your silence admits your guilt. Next charge.

Prosecutor: You are charged with condemning the church for its use of ecclesiastical language and religious dogma to further the out of date practices of the faith. You have publicly accused us of failing to move with the time, being unable to embrace change and innovation and remaining rooted in the past which makes our collective life and worth irrelevant and inaccessible to the people of the present.

Rebuff 2: This is nonsense! Of course we have to use ecclesiastical language. It's shorthand. When I say evangelism we all know what it means. If I try and put it into simple, every day, language it loses its mystery, its specialness, its holiness. We all understand that it means ... it means ... good news sharing, I suppose. Going to people and explaining why we have been saved and what they need to do if they want similar benefits. But it's just a word. It's not important that others don't understand it. It's not like they've got to do anything about it. It's like grace – and you all know what I mean by that. It's for us. Not for anyone else. You wouldn't expect a lawyer to use ordinary language. Legal language is acceptable because of its precise nature. It does the job. A butcher uses special language too. How many of us would eat rump steak if it was described as that bit of meat off the back of a cow near its backside? We've got to have our special language. And we've got to cling to the old ways. They're familiar. They make people feel comfortable. They know what's going on and what's going to happen next. That's why we come to church – to be comfortable. All this talk of change and embracing innovation is just an excuse to make church challenging. No one wants that - except you. You want to take over. You want to turn us inside out. You want to destroy us.

Chair: I agree. If you are guilty of this charge then your only objective is to destroy the structure of the church as it is now. You want to take away any hope that we might find in our language and our ritual. You want things your way. That alone, if you are guilty of this charge, is enough to condemn you. How do you plead to this charge? Are you guilty of it? *(pause)* Your silence admits your guilt. Next charge.

Prosecutor: You have accused the church of being too preoccupied with premises at the neglect of people. You say that

we are given many resources with which we can offer aid and comfort that we squander on buildings that cannot be effectively heated in winter and outdated musical instruments that cannot be played effectively at any time. You accuse us of holding onto our buildings at any cost. You say this leads directly to our apparent lack of energy towards mission - sharing the good news in a wider community. You tell us we just tinker with offering pastoral care as opposed to getting our hands dirty. We show a lack of public opposition to the injustices in our communities and world. You accuse us of failing to condemn wrong doings and the actions of those who have power over others wherever we see it.

Rebuff 3: How could we exist without our buildings? The traditional foursquare structure standing at the crossroads is how people recognise church both inside and without our communities. We couldn't possibly give them up. What would we do for a meeting place? Do you expect us to share some village or community hall with others? How does that make things special? How could we get the holiness into a space that is used for line dancing in the afternoon and a gardening club in the evening? And so what if it costs a lot to maintain the fabric of the building? Well, it's our money we use. It's the tithes and offerings of the faithful freely given that make sure they're warm and dry when they come for their sacred hour of worship each week. They just wouldn't give as much money if they couldn't see and feel the benefit of it each week when they gathered in church. Giving money simply to help those who are worse off than you is a non-starter. No one is that generous or has a social conscious that is that strong. And this business of taking a stand. That's all for your benefit as well. You want us to speak out in your name. You want everyone to know that you're behind what we're doing – that we're acting on your behalf, under your direction. You want to rule over all the world. You want to be a dictator and you want us to be your agents in this conspiracy.

Chair: I agree. That's the motive behind this accusation you have made. You want to take our power from us. You want your way of doing things to be the one that everyone follows. You want everyone to share your views. You want to be the head of the church. That alone, if you are guilty of this charge, is enough to condemn you. How do you plead to this charge? Are you guilty of it? *(pause)* Your silence admits your guilt. Next charge.

Prosecutor: That is the end of the charges.

Chair: So. There we have it. Your silence has condemned you. You are guilty of all the charges we have laid before you. Before I pronounce the sentence I will offer you one last chance to speak in your defence. *(pause)* If you remain silent I have no choice but to ...

Nicodemus: If I might ...

Chair: Go on.

Nicodemus: If he will not speak for himself, will the Council be prepared to let me speak for him?

Chair: Very well. ... But be brief. We have more important matters to attend to.

Nicodemus: I know this man. In fact all of us know him. He has been speaking in the streets, the squares and many other public spaces. Thousands have flocked to hear him. If you haven't been yourselves, you will have spoken to those who went. You cannot deny that. You have heard what he has to say. You know the message he has consistently preached for all to hear. That is the message of loving God first and loving our neighbour as ourselves. It's nothing new. We know it is rooted in our law. It is one all encompassing interpretation of the commandments that the Lord himself handed down directly to our ancestors. All he was teaching was the fundamentals of our spiritual life. I know some of you thought that what he said in public was different to what he said in private. I listened to those accusations. But I had also listened to him. I had been moved by his message of love and compassion. I could not believe that there was a secret agenda to this seemingly honest man. So I decided to confront him for myself. I went to see him face to face. I didn't want to bestow any implied status or approval by me or the Council so I was careful. I went at night. I went under the cover of darkness. I met him and spoke with him. I listened to what he had to say in private, compared it to his public statements and questioned him about them both. Yes, you are right with your suspicions. What he says in private is different from the things he says in public. But the message is the same. His private conversations are more about the how and the why rather than the what. To the crowds he preached about the Kingdom of Heaven and what it is going to be like. He taught in general terms and in simile – often drawing on the natural world around him. He made his message promising peace, love and justice available for anyone to hear and understand. When I met him face to face he talked to me about what I needed to do. I don't even now fully understand what he said but it was about needing to have a fresh start. I needed to face up to my failure to fully embrace the Law and start again using his teachings as a new law, a fresh expression of my faith in my relationship with God. He spoke about the need for us all to be born again. He wanted us to have the nature of new born babies who trust their parents to guide and care for them without complete understanding. It makes sense. It's challenging I'd admit. To lay aside everything with which I have

underpinned my life and put my simple, child like, faith in my God who wants – needs – to have a personal relationship with me. Then to go forward into the tomorrow with only that to sustain me. That takes faith – real faith – and I'm not sure that I'm strong enough to walk that road without his help. We cannot condemn him for simply wanting to give us a new way to travel life's journey – faith in our relationship with God thanks to his direct and personal intervention.

Chair: You have made a convincing argument. It is clear that you are a friend – if not a supporter – of this man. That will be taken into consideration in my judgement. However, there is no doubt from what you have said that he is guilty of the crimes with which he has been charged. Why, from your own account, it appears that he is even claiming some sort of extra special relationship with God. Maybe he is even claiming equality with him.

Nicodemus: I never said that – and neither has he.

Chair: Nevertheless, whatever you may say, in the final analysis it is his silence that has condemned him. We have given him every opportunity to answer these grave charges. Time after time we have offered the chance for him to proclaim his innocence. Even at this late stage once more I offer him the chance to speak in his own defence. (pause) He is obviously guilty of everything. He has to be punished for his actions. I am merciful though. I can see your friendship for this man. I am prepared to release his body to you following his execution.

Pilate has entered unseen by the Council:

Pilate: What's this talk of execution?

The Council rises:

Chair: Governor ... I didn't realise ... I ...

Pilate: What is this talk of execution?

Chair: It's nothing to bother you ...

Pilate: Nothing? Nothing! For you to take a man's life is nothing? For you to take a man's life without consulting me is nothing?

Chair: Governor. Forgive me. I take the death of no man lightly. But this is the rabble-rouser, the trouble maker of which we have spoken. This is the one who is determined to overthrow all order and rule in this area. He is determined to plunge this region into chaos.

Pilate: So. You have finally decided to act. I see you have chosen your time well – acting in the dead of night at a festival time when his supporters will give you little trouble. Have you examined him? What does he say about his actions? How does he defend them?

Chair: He says nothing. He has remained silent throughout.

Pilate: Surely he realises the seriousness of the situation? Surely he knows this is the last opportunity that he has to save himself? Surely that alone would make him speak out?

Chair: He says nothing.

Pilate: Then maybe he will speak to me. You. Turn round. Look at me.

Jesus turns to face Pilate.

Pilate: Have you nothing to say to me? ... This is your last chance. I hold the power of life and death – your life – your death. I can grant you imprisonment – or freedom – or I can leave you in these hands to die. ... Speak to me and I can act. Remain silent and you will surely die. ... I find this insulting. You are my subject and I will hear what you have to say. Tell me now what defence you offer for your actions. ... Very well. For this insult I will have you beaten.

Guards come and untie Jesus's hands. They "rip" his shirt down the middle of his back and stretch out his arms as if holding him for whipping. As Pilate continues Jesus and the guards remain still. Under Pilate's speech there is a slow, rhythmical clapping.

Pilate: It hurts, doesn't it? The stiff wet leather biting into the softness that is your back. It's going to get wetter that whip. Your blood is going to soak it. As the thongs bite deeper and deeper into your living flesh the pain is going to get worse. And your blood is going to pour out. All you have to do is to speak to me. Tell me what made you do it. Admit the errors of your way. Confess that you have been teaching a lie – leading the faithful away from their true faith for your own ends. That's all you've got to do. It'll stop then. I can make it all stop. All the pain. All that tearing of the flesh, the pouring of your blood. I can put a stop to it. And I can protect you then. I can take you under my wing. Of course, you wouldn't be free any more and I'd control who you saw and what you said but you would be alive. You could go on living. And everything would be just the same. We could put all this behind us and move forward together. All you have to do is to talk to me.

There is a pause as the clapping continues. Suddenly Pilate comes to a conclusion and makes a gesture. The clapping – the whipping – ceases. The guards release his arms and leave the area.

Chair: He says nothing.

Pilate: Very well. If he will not speak to me, I will no longer have any interest in this matter. I believe he is an honest but misguided man. I do not see his message as subversive but I do not fully understand it. And he says nothing to make the matter clearer. You, with your greater knowledge and understanding of these spiritual matters are the obvious agency to act in this case. I relinquish my authority in these circumstances. I delegate my power to you. Do as you think fit. Your actions will be no reflection on me or on any position I might wish to take now or in the future. Be it on his own head – and yours. It is nothing to do with me. I give him back to you for your determination of the matter.

Jesus is 'dismissed' by a gesture from Pilate who leaves. Jesus turns once more to face the Council and we can see that his back is now streaked with blood.

Chair: Very well. Take him out and kill him.

A slow chant of 'Kill Him!' begins. The members of the Council and the other performers cluster round Jesus who leads them off the stage. Only the Narrator is left:

Narrator: It finished on a cross.

Screen shows a video - "The Final Painting" or "Crucifixion Countdown (No clock)" downloadable from sermonspice.com are good – while:

Jesus: It hurts. As I hang here with ropes biting into my forearms, nails tearing at my wrists and ankles and blood pouring from the wounds on my back and the scratches torn by the thorns pushed into my head, it hurts. The pain began last evening when I knew it was the time to say goodbye to my friends, my companions of the last three years. I tried to make it special. I tried to make it memorable. I tried to show them just how important that meal was for them. Somehow, even after everything I had said to them, they still didn't understand what was about to happen. That's when the pain began. It grew over the passing hours, becoming more intense as each inevitable incident came to pass. It got stronger in the garden when I faced my final personal point of decision. It got bigger when even my closest and most attentive of companions – Peter, James, John - could not stay awake with me through that fateful night. It reached an agonising climax when they came to arrest me – as that angry mob emerged out of the darkness. There – right out in front – stood Judas. He came towards me and kissed me – betraying me with that sign of greeting that we often exchanged as friends. That hurt – not just me but the rest of us all gathered there in that garden. I could bear that pain but they could not and suddenly that night was filled with shouts, swords and a servant's blood. Somehow the severed ear brought some sort of relief to the pain. This was familiar territory. I knew what to do in such circumstances. My simple act of caring and healing brought an end to the fighting. But not to my pain. For as the fighting ceased my friends fled into the night, leaving me in the hands of my enemies, hurting and alone. I didn't think it could get any worse but I was wrong. Over the next few hours events took their inevitable course, led me from Council to Governor to King, back to Governor and to this place of execution. Stage by stage, encounter by encounter, action and reaction, my pain started to grow again. Now, as I hang here, facing an excruciating death with my family and friends looking on helplessly and my executioners gambling for my possessions, that pain is ever more intense. It is the pain of separation. It is the pain of isolation. It is the simply being alone, totally alone. As the final act of my ministry is played out – the climax I committed myself to last evening is reached – I am left all alone hanging here to die. After everything I have done, after everything I have seen and felt, all that is left to me is this all consuming pain of total isolation. I can't bear it any longer. My strength is gone. Father! Father! Why have you forsaken me?! Nothing. Only the silence, and the darkness and the pain. There is nothing I can do about any of them. It is finished. Father! Into your hands I commit my spirit! ... Where do I go from here?

Narrator: It ended in a garden.

Screen shows a garden, warmer than before:

Mary: Once they were sure that he was dead - after they had cruelly thrust a spear into his side - the Romans allowed us to have his body. It was broken with the marks of his painful end clearly to be seen. Not that I saw them clearly. Tears filled my eyes as I tended to him. It's not right that we should have to bury someone so young. But that was all that was left for us. Time was against us because the Sabbath was coming on fast. Not that we were worried about breaking the Law in our need to exercise compassion. We just didn't want to attract any more anger from the Jewish leaders. We didn't want their rage to be directed at anyone else. We wanted no one else to die. There was just time to wrap him in the grave clothes, cover his face and lay him in the new tomb that had been given to us. We sealed that tomb as best we could. We used a heavy stone that took several of the men to move. We didn't want any interference with his body by the authorities who had already taken his life. And then we had to leave him. We had to go. That felt as if it was the end - the very end.

After a short pause a strap line appears over the garden slide saying "To be continued" The slide dissolves into another with the times of the local Easter Sunday morning services.