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An uncommon faith.

The Christian faith is not what you may think it is.

It might surprise you.

It certainly has very little to do with 'church'.

It's about you and your journey through your life, not about which church you belong to or not.

It's not even about 'being a good Christian' – who are we to judge who or what is 'good' or even 'Christian'?

It's about your relationship with God, even if you think you don't have one.

And because of that relationship, it's also about the effect you have on other people's lives and the effect they have on you, even complete strangers you have never met before, or ever will meet in your time in this world.

Everything you do changes someone else's life in some way, for good or for ill.

It's about recognising even the little things matter.

So let's start at the beginning.

The basics.

Jesus was once asked to clarify the religious law which baffled most ordinary people who were trying to live good and faithful lives. It was too complicated and needed the almost continual intervention, explanation and interpretation. It was also corrupt in that people 'in the know' used the law to defend and justify their selfishly motivated actions whilst exerting power and control over others.

The law itself was not a bad thing. The way it was often used was.

So Jesus broke it down into two very simple statements.

1. Love God as best as you can, as best as you understand, and as honestly as you can, and hold nothing back.
2. Love your neighbour (the person you see in need) in exactly the same way.

He finished by saying that if you can do these two things then you have fulfilled all that is required of you.

What Jesus did was to take away the middleman and left it for the individual to apply the law for themselves.

It put responsibility for action straight back into the hands of the people it really belonged to and should not have been taken from.

It also ensured that Jesus was a marked man. From that moment on he was destined to be made an example of for challenging the established religious authorities. A contrived, very painful and public death would be the end result to deter any further rebellion.

If you look at the principles behind both statements, there is an emphasis on the word 'love'.

There is an assumption of on-going relationships.

There is an assumption that there is a God.

There is an assumption of personal responsibility.

There is no assumption that any of this will be easy.

Those very same understandings of scriptural principles mark us out too. We carry on in that same tradition Jesus taught rather than in the unquestioning and overly compliant way of faith 'the church' demands of us.

This is why this booklet is called, 'An uncommon faith.'

Anyone who looks to a life based on real faith knows it will always be 'a work in progress' and will inevitably attract a lot of criticism and difficulty.

Works versus faith?

There is a tension in the New Testament between 'works' and 'faith'.

Some say 'faith' is more important and that it is 'faith' that saves us.

Some say that 'works' (or good deeds) is the evidence of an active faith.

Some say this is not true because anyone without 'faith' can do good deeds.

Some say that 'faith' without 'works' shows that 'faith' is worthless.

All those statements have some truth in them, but they are not the complete truth either taken individually or even if taken as a group.

The argument shouldn't be 'works versus faith' but 'works and faith'.

One is a consequence of the other. They work hand in hand.

It is true that they can stand independently, but they work better together.

There is something that binds them together and that is 'love'. The particular aspects of love most involved in this process are 'patience', 'compassion', 'kindness', and 'respect', and a willingness to step out of one's comfort zone for the sake of those in need.

The fact is that you cannot genuinely love someone without it affecting your behaviour. Your love for that person is demonstrated in your actions, and the more you love them, the more you want to do for them.

In the two statements made by Jesus

1. Love God as best as you can, as best as you understand, and as honestly as you can, and hold nothing back,

2. Love your neighbour (the person you see in need) in exactly the same way,

the first word is 'love', a word that inevitably and unavoidably demands an emotional, spiritual and physical response. It will involve some inconvenience, some expense in terms of time, resources and effort, but there is no price too high to pay where genuine love is concerned. Talking about love is not enough.

Genuine love is marked by its sacrificial nature and it is evidenced by not just doing one's duty or what is expected, but by going the full distance.

That means challenging and breaking out of the restrictive and supposedly Christian cultural mould we are often shoe horned into by the churches we attend. Only in doing so will we be able to fulfil the ministries we were each individually entrusted with by God. Jesus came to set us free from the constraints of the law but 'the church' has recreated it and placed us all back into bondage.

The rules and regulations.

People just love being in charge and they also love organizing things.

That is the trouble with religion.

It all starts out well and with good intentions, but it ends up with hierarchies and rules and committees who tell other people what to do, how to do it and what to believe.

It also creates division.

It also becomes an end in itself.

This is not what God intended at all.

It's not about 'rules' but about relationships and sometimes there are no 'rules' that can be applied. You have to 'wing it', make the best decisions at the time and in the circumstances, and take responsibility for your choices or decisions.

Most of life is 'winging it'. Yes, there are rules that help us all get on together but doing the 'right' thing (not compromising your conscience) is and will always be much more important.

You can always ask for advice but the final decision should always be yours.

The Bible.

The bible is often considered to be the unchangeable word of God and it is full of things that can be interpreted as or be seen as rules and regulations.

Some things are fixed but a surprising amount is open to personal interpretation, and that interpretation can be directed by personal or circumstances and timing. Don't be surprised if the same piece of scriptural text can say different things to you at different times in your life. We change, we get older, we get wiser, and we see things differently. That is normal and that is just part of 'growing up'.

What matters is that if you read a piece of scriptural text, you should act upon it if it resonates with you and not worry too much about the things that don't make sense. Remember, faith is a work in progress and you can't deal with everything all at once.

The main thing is that self-honesty is something you need to take really seriously.

As human beings, we are pretty good at being able to convince ourselves that we are making choices for all the right reasons.

I know quite a number of really good Christians who can put up really good arguments that God really wants them to have a new car/camera/holiday/etc., when all they are doing is being very dishonest with themselves. They are also very good at misquoting scripture to excuse or justify their behaviour

Blaming God is really childish, and if you find yourself making excuses or having to find reasons to justify your decision then you really should question your motivation!

(For the record, it is ok to spend money on yourself and treat yourself within reason.)

Reading the bible is a good idea but using a suitable reading plan is even better. I have found 'Daily Bread' very good but there are plenty of others about.

I have read the bible in its entirety three times in my life and whilst it was interesting it wasn't entirely productive. I sometimes feel I would have been better studying one of the gospels in depth or even just praying.

The bible should not be read like a book, from beginning to end.

Neither should it just be opened randomly in my experience although I have occasionally been very lucky when I have done that.

To be clear, the bible might be considered the word of God but it is no replacement for spending time with God. It is like having the choice between reading the autobiography of people who met your most favourite person in history, or actually meeting that person 'in person' and spending time with them.

It is mistakenly easy to think reading the bible is spending time with God. It isn't.

The bible is not such a clear cut library of books about God as it has changed over time in both content and understanding. Every time a new translation has come into being it often subtly changes the meaning of the text to suit a particular theological position or way of thinking.

Some books that were originally in the bible are no longer so, and some that were originally not in are now present. Whilst there is a loose agreement about what books should be in the bible, it is not 'written in stone' or universally agreed.

If you don't believe me then compare Roman Catholic and Protestant bible and see for yourselves.

There are other areas of concern too. Many people have a problem with both the letters of St Paul and St Paul himself. They believe he hijacked the early church and quickly replaced the teachings of Jesus with teachings of his own.

Although some of the things St Paul wrote are exceptionally spiritual and 'feel right', there is some evidence that he is not all he seems. You should always decide for yourselves.

The main issue is that many people believe that the words of Jesus should be the end of the New Testament as there is nothing more that needs to be or can be usefully added.

On that basis alone I would seriously caution anyone reading the words of any of later writings which add to or interpret Jesus' words in ways not intended. They should not necessarily be taken as 'gospel' and be considered prayerfully.

So what can you believe?

There is a simple four point test with any writing that purports to be Christian:

1. Does it bring the reader into a closer relationship with God?
2. Is it consistent with Jesus' own words and teaching?
3. Is it consistent with what the rest of the bible teaches or is it teaching something different?
4. Does it 'feel' right and resonate within you?

We hold the Epistle of St James in such high regard because (for us) it meets all four criteria, but in no way does it replace Jesus' own teaching.

The same four point test can be used for articles and sermons too.

It is true that the bible can also be misused.

In fact, you can find justification for just about anything within its words by taking those words out of context or by being very selective.

There is no end to the deviousness of the human mind, and if someone quotes the bible at you, you should check to see whether it has been taken out of context or is being misused before you act upon it or respond.

And 'the church' is just as guilty of this when it suits its purposes.

Unfortunately, there isn't a naughty step big enough for 'the church'.....

The church.

Most people think of 'the church', that is the organisation and the building, as being 'authentic Christianity'.

In actual fact, that may not be the case.

As an organization, it has to balance a number of different agendas, many nothing to do with faith at all. Its involvement in power politics is perhaps the worst of all because decisions and acts are made in the name of the Christian faith, and sometimes there is little that is 'Christian' about these things to commend them.

For organizations who talk a lot about the hallmarks of compassion, unity and love, there is often a great lack of those qualities.

The fact that the Christian church is so divided speaks volumes as to the damage that power politics plays.

However, you shouldn't judge the Christian faith on the actions of the organizations that purport to represent it.

'The church' has been a victim of its own success to a large extent. Historically, it provided a safe place for the faithful to meet, to teach and encourage, and to look at ways of supporting the poor and needy in the community.

It also started to formulate what exactly being a Christian meant, what they (as a community) actually believed and to develop different kinds of liturgies and sacraments and ways of doing things. There were frequent disagreements and some serious fallings out in this process.

The thing about these early churches was they were mostly God focused and not spending an inordinate amount of time managing and financing the organization.

At some point in history, this balance changed and it was a sickness that proved fatal in many circumstances. The rules and regulations began to matter more than the people they were meant to serve. There was only one way to believe, one way to worship, one way to pray, one way to do things. Anything else was just 'wrong' and subject to censure or even rejection and exclusion. These kinds of churches were often very powerful and exerted great control over their members and did not tolerate or encourage any kind of dissention or difference of opinion.

Sometimes, people within these churches saw what was happening and tried to change things from within. Sometimes they were successful. Often they were not, so they left and started something new.

And the cycle started all over again.

If nothing else, it proves that churches, as organisations, do have a natural and inescapable life cycle. They are born, they grow, they stagnate and they die. As one dies, another is reborn.

It is the Christian faith that keeps the organisation alive and gives it its life force. Once the organisation tries to take control of the faith, it is destined to die.

With this in mind, I'd like to offer the question, how much notice should you take of 'the church'?

'The church' is there to aid and guide you in your faith rather than direct or control it.

Best advice - take what is good and leave the rest.

The truth is that 'the church' cannot 'save' you. Only God can do that.

Therefore, take whatever help and guidance you can from whatever source you can but remain focused on God rather than any man-made organisation that says it speaks on His behalf.

God is quite capable of speaking for Himself in any number of ways, and through 'the church' is just one of many.

'The church' doesn't have a monopoly on this, even though it likes to think it does.

The Christian community.

This represents not just a single particular 'church' but the whole collection of churches and Christian societies, collectives and cell groups which may or may not be based in people's houses or hired rooms or purpose built buildings.

You are more likely to get a grounded and rounded Christian education and sense of support by joining a number of these different communities, although it will involve a little more work on your part.

You will also discover that there is more than one way of doing things, more than one form of liturgy, more than one way praying and worshipping, and more than one way to be a part of what is going on.

You might say it's all about finding what works best for you.

And you can't make that decision until you know what is out there.

Not only can you take out of the Christian community but you can contribute to it.

Belonging or being a part of something is good in two ways.

Not only can you get support and encouragement but you will also find a sense of fulfilment and purpose as you discover you can contribute things back in return that make you feel valued and give you a sense of purpose and belonging.

This is the best part of belonging to any community, but particularly the Christian community, for everyone has their own specific spiritual and practical gifts, talents and skills that can be put to use.

If they are not put to use then all that will be left is a feeling of abandonment, frustration and purposelessness.

Churches are exceptionally bad at using their members – their organisational structure will often deny open access to individual ministry (recognising, applying and using those gifts, talents and skills you have been gifted with).

This is often because they are focussed on academic recognition and success, archaic selection procedures and rigid structural protocols.

Somehow, they have forgotten that God calls who He calls, and the church's job is to encourage, support, validate and test that call, not to give God its approval for His choice.

The church is here to enable rather than disable ministry and it stand in judgement when it fails in this duty of care.

The right to minister.

Gifts, talents and skills are given to each and every individual for a purpose, for a reason, and for using.

What would be the benefit of anyone receiving a specific set of practical and spiritual gifts, talents and skills, to the individual and the community they were a part of if they were never allowed to exercise them?

Simple answer: there would be no benefit at all.

The more complex answer is that

1. the recipient of those practical and spiritual gifts, talents and skills would have no purpose unless those gifts, talents and skills were put into use
2. society would be denied those gifts, talents and skills
3. by implication the individual must take some responsibility for those gifts, talents and skills not being used
4. and equally, society must take some responsibility for not recognising and allowing the practice of those individual gifts, talents and skills.

Putting it another way, both the recipient of the gifts, talents and skills, and the community they were a part of are to be held accountable for their actions and responses. Fault and/or responsibility is mutually held.

The right to ministry is a God given right and should not be denied or refused because there are consequences.

However there is a mind set to get beyond.

Most ministry is incidental, what you might call 'in passing' or 'unofficial. You do what you can with what you have got in the circumstances you find yourself in. It is a natural response that needs no further qualification.

The difficulty comes when it is in an organizational context and then it becomes a matter of power politics based around committees, rule and regulations and status. This is especially true of much official ministry within 'the church'.

Believe me, 'the church' is extremely possessive of its power and authority, and even if there is good evidence of gifts, talents, skills and existing ministry, will only approve those whose faces fit. Being called by God is not sufficient in itself it seems.

It is hardly any wonder the churches find themselves short of clergy and volunteers to keep things running.

Over the last fifteen years or more in my own ministry as a priest I have seen increasing numbers of good Christian folk turn their back on 'the church' and it is no wonder when 'the church' is more concerned about its survival and maintaining the status quo than it is on supporting and encouraging its congregations in their faith.

According to the Gospel of John, St Peter was warned three times* in close succession to look after all of the followers of Jesus and make sure they did not go spiritually hungry or were abandoned. It is a message that has been increasingly ignored in present times.

What it has meant is that these good Christian folk spend more time in the community than in 'church', and that might not be such a bad thing after all. It does mean that ministry, the exercise of all of those individual sets of gifts, talents and skills, can be put to good purpose unhindered by 'official' (church) interference.

Our best advice to all Christians regarding the exercise of ministry, in or out of church, is 'get on with it and don't let anyone stop you'.

The thing that may get overlooked is that Christians in the community still need to support and encourage one another. That is essential for successful and long lived ministry. Ministry needs support and encouragement - it doesn't take place in isolation but has both place and context.

** Jesus Reinstates Peter- John 21, NIV.*

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "**Feed my lambs.**"

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "**Take care of my sheep.**"

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

*Jesus said, “**Feed my sheep.**”¹⁸*

About Peter:

‘Tradition’ interprets Matthew 16, verses 13-20, as Peter alone being given authority over the emergent church, a convenience that has been much built on by the established and main stream apostolic churches.

I personally dispute this interpretation as the response made by Jesus was made to all those disciples present – the ‘you’ is contextual and intended to be understood in its plural form, not singular.

It therefore gives responsibility and authority to **all** the disciples, not just one.

Mathew 16, verses 21-23 should also be looked at regarding Peter’s supposed authority.

Support and encouragement.

Everyone needs support and encouragement.

If you can’t get it at the church you go to then get it where you can in the wider Christian community.

The Christian community is far bigger than any one 'church', and in actual fact, you could be seriously limiting the opportunities for getting the support and encouragement you need by just remaining within your church's social and spiritual boundaries.

It is also quite noticeable that outside the constraints of their church building, Christians of all denominations have a much better sense and practice of Christian unity than might be at first anticipated.

Getting support can be as easy as having conversations with other people and asking for their prayers and advice.

(This goes to prove that Christian unity is far more than 'Churches Together' which is yet another of those top down inter-church initiatives that ends up dividing more people than it brings together.)

The important concept here is that support and encouragement of Christian ministry benefits everyone.

If it stays within the confines of 'church' then only the 'church' really benefits, but when the ministry is in the community, then both the community and 'church' benefit.

The other thing is, if the 'church' is disabled in any way (say under 'lock down'), ministry can still continue. (The Covid-19 church closures quickly revealed the problem with operating building based churches.)

Ministry in the community ultimately comes down to the individual, and it is up to the individual to take responsibility for the good exercising of their gifts, talents and skills.

What I find interesting is that these gifts, talents and skills are in the stewardship of individuals rather than organisations, although organisations do like to claim them as their own and try to take charge of them by 'authorising' ministry. This is simply not acceptable and it seems to always have been a problem. Even the disciples were guilty of this practise. Mark, chapter 9, records the following:

Jesus Forbids Sectarianism (NIV)

³⁸ Now John answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us."

³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me.

The biblical principles of ministry.

Ministry is an unconditional response to circumstances based on compassion and love.

The exemplar parable is that of the Good Samaritan in Luke's Gospel, chapter 10, verses 25-37* (see end of chapter).

As a model for ministry, one might reduce this parable to four simple principles:

1. see the need,
2. deal with it in the best and most appropriate way you can,
3. if needed, transfer responsibility to those who can best give support,
4. always follow up if appropriate.

It is not something that needs to be formalised, although matters like safeguarding and risk assessment cannot be totally ignored.

It goes without saying that anyone in ministry needs to 'be aware' and act responsibly at all times. It's all part of being a good steward of one's gifts, talents and skills.

So you are aware, ministry is more than the act itself and has a threefold outcome:

1. the person in need receives (what they need rather than what they want)
2. the person giving has their ministry validated in some way and is encouraged in their own faith,

3. it brings both the giver and receiver closer to both God and one another.

If you ever get to the point where you go out looking for 'ministry' then you should take a hard look at your motives for doing so.

Ministry is all around us and most of it is to do with the small things in life. If you can be trusted with those things then the bigger things will come when God sees you are ready, but don't desire them. There is no such thing as greater and lesser ministry. It is all the same and equally as important.

Something to remember - ministry is not about you or your status. Your unique gifts**, talents and skills are for the benefit of others and you hold them in trust.

They are freely given so give of them freely. Don't hold back.

Be satisfied with what you have been given and make those gifts, talents and skills freely and unconditionally available to everyone in need.

Don't desire those gifts not meant for you or you will just find unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

And lastly, be very careful what you pray for. Some forms of ministry are highly specialised and dangerous, particularly those dealing with unfriendly spiritual forces. They are not to be undertaken lightly and can cause lasting damage if underestimated.

*** The Parable of the Good Samaritan.** (Luke 10, verses 25-37, NIV)

25 And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?"

27 So he answered and said, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbour as yourself.' "

28 And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live."

29 But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

30 Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

32 Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. 33 But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' 36 So which of these three do you think was neighbour to him who fell among the thieves?"

37 And he (the lawyer) said, "He who showed mercy on him."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

**** Spiritual Gifts: Unity in Diversity. (1 Corinthians 12, verses 1-11, NKJB)**

1 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant....

4 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: 8 for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.

Not 'ministry'.

When is 'ministry' not 'ministry'?

This is a bit 'nit-picky' but worth looking at in detail. It is the difference between a product labelled 'chocolate' and 'contains chocolate', 'made in England' and 'made in the UK', and similar.

They are comparisons between the 100% and genuine item and something that isn't wholly what it may suggest it is or pertains to be.

The same is true of 'ministry'. We are told some things are 'ministry' and we just accept this as 'gospel', but we shouldn't always believe what we are told.

The outcomes of ministry were outlined earlier:-

1. the person in need receives (what they need rather than what they want)
2. the person giving has their ministry validated in some way and is encouraged in their own faith,
3. it brings both the giver and receiver closer to both God and one another,
4. and it demonstrates and gives testimony to the love, power and capability of God to those who witnessed the exercise of ministry.

We can use these as 'checks' to see if 'ministry' is the genuine article or not. Some things we consider as 'ministry' are not what they seem. They may appear very creditable and even 'spectacular' or 'highly desirable, but not stand up to closer examination.

Let me give two examples, different extremes of the same thing that many Christians consider 'ministry' in all its fullness.

Big missions may appear successful and have lots of 'converts' but these 'converts' are often the results of a carefully prepared, well-rehearsed and well delivered emotional 'hit' that overwhelms the senses. Whilst some of those attending may have had a genuine experience, many 'conversions' can be explained away as 'going with the flow and becoming a willing part of it'.

People get caught up in the moment and drawn in, and whilst there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that as an experience, it is what happens afterwards that really counts.

In the cold light of day and after the mission is over, the reality is these new converts find themselves on their own, there is no lasting support and encouragement, and often no place to go. All that is left is a feeling of emptiness as the memories and feelings fade in the cold light of day.

This is not 'ministry'.

Neither is the perfectly performed liturgy of the cathedral with its rows of choristers and well vested priests as they work through familiar and ancient words.

It is a different kind of show, but as with big missions, it is not 'ministry' per se.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that 'ministry' hasn't taken place. In both the examples I just used, ministry can take place in the giving of the word (both the scriptural readings and the sermon if relevant), the prayers and any worship, but it doesn't mean to say it is 'ministry' taken as a whole.

Take away the actual ministry that occurs and what you have left is merely a framework and a backdrop. It is little more than theatre and spectacle in both examples although they are of a different kind.

There is actually nothing wrong with this providing it enhances rather than get in the way of or detracts from real 'ministry'.

The danger is 'who' or 'what' 'ministry focusses on - sometimes God can get lost in all the ritual and performance and tradition, however well intended.

Perhaps we need to add one more check to our test for ministry and that is:-

5. Who does it glorify the most?

So long as the answer is 'God and God alone!' then maybe it is genuine ministry and can be trusted to be what it seems to be.

If the answer is 'maybe the person', or even 'the organisation', then this is probably not the real deal.

Maybe genuine Christian ministry is based wholly on the immediate and natural response to need, rather than being something that can be planned, something that is driven by love and compassion and doesn't even need thinking about.

Maybe 'ministry' is more about what happens outside of 'church' and is an attitude to living a life based on compassion and love, something that is unplanned and rather chaotic.

Maybe it's all the small stuff.

Maybe the minute you think of something as 'ministry' it stops being that.

Maybe 'ministry' is simply an opportunity to show you and God care enough to spend a little time with someone and show that actually they matter.

Maybe 'ministry' is there to stop us thinking only of ourselves and our own needs.

Maybe there are lots of 'maybe's.....

Maybe we should stop thinking about them and just get on with it simply because we love God and those around us. It is that that matters, and no one has the right or authority to take that from us.

The consequences of trying to control or interfere or even stop the God-given ministry of others doesn't bear thinking about.

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MY LADY WISDOM

Explore and covet ; enjoy and become her!

Fr Ed Elsey. CJ., OSJ.

Wisdom is always traditionally referred to in the feminine case. I wonder why!

The doctrine of immortality seems to have been accepted by the bulk of the peoples of their contemporary world, but more slowly by Israel itself. It was certainly denied in the prominent and powerful Sadducean circles.

Without the acceptance of this doctrine, all the world would seem pointless. In Ecclesiastes, we find a view of human life that appears studied negatives.

Man is the grave and Death is Man. There is no memory remaining of what life has been. Any thoughts of having a participation and heritage left to a growing world seems completely irrelevant. What is that classic idiomatic verse: something about the Indispensable Man?

- take then a bucket of water,

and plunge your hand up to the wrist;

withdraw it, and the hole that remains

is the measure of how much you will be missed!

Personification by definition is the attribution of personal nature to the material; symbolising an immaterial event in human condition and figure; exemplifying typically to enlarge understanding. [Oxford Shorter Dict] Oesterley/Robinson defines the spirit of Man as 'the personification of immortality'.

After the Destruction of the Temple in AD70, the Sadducean position disappeared.

Shemoneh 'Esreh [the eighteen Benedictions] uses: 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord, that quickenest the dead'.

The theme of immortality is now an integral part of Jewish faith and doctrine. A fuller belief in a fuller life and a fuller God.

Two problems became preoccupations in Hebrew philosophy:

How did God make the world?

How can and does God communicate with Man?

The answer was to evolve very slowly and is inseparably tied to the search for wisdom.

God planting the garden [Genesis 2] Divine fingers carefully moulding the earth in all the facets we perceive today, though altered or damaged by Man over centuries. The anthropomorphic conception of God. God with a physical body. God not unlike Man but with greater powers. A God to be feared. A God to be searched out. A God to be worshipped. A God to be 'interceded' to/with. A God to be loved. A God to become one with.

Wisdom became the highest of all personal qualities which would/could raise Man to be with God. The wisdom of God, as an object of desire and adoration.

Proverbs 8 [read vv 1-6; then 22-31; then 35-36].

The personification of wisdom as seen as being poetical in origin but on the verge of becoming a philosophical doctrine.

There was a long-held belief that Yahweh could appear to men in human form often not recognised. - a parallel maybe with the Emmaus road - until some personal even superhuman act betrayed his Divinity.

Simple definitions to help us here:

‘theophany’ - manifestation of God;

‘theocentric’ - having God as its centre;

‘theocracy’ - a state governed by God;

‘theogony’ - genealogy of God [poetic]

‘theomorphic’ - having the form of God;

‘theology’ - science of religion or a study of God;

There was an aim then to try to find out God’s communication. Traditional methods used were Laying a fleece [Gideon]; casting a sacred ‘lot’; putting God to the test to discover His will. Climbing mountains, departing to the desert, escaping captivity - all were devices to try and seek a personal presence of God to appear and from OT examples, it seems He often did - and chiding them when they got it wrong - often terrible wrong!

Deuteronomy 6... Christ’s answer to temptation. ‘Thou shalt not’ more than ‘Thou shalt’.

God ‘took possession’ of a man or woman He declared to be selected by Him. ‘Breathed into them’ and through them ‘uttered his message to a nation. Prophets, Judges, Kings, and eventually ‘His son’ Jesus Christ. viz Saul ‘became another man’ [1 Sam 10, 6]

So Man becomes the medium of Divine Communication [John Bright]

The Wisdom of Solomon might come in at this point. 7:22 to 8, 1 [the ‘great’ passage]

God is offered to every human being through Wisdom but it is only taken up by the righteous in response to their earned and persistent prayer. The Souls of the Righteous are therefore 'in the hand of God' and no danger can touch them nor shadow hide their light. [Charles Harris - Lampeter College]

Christianity only 'borrowed' these ideas from a longstanding Hebrew tradition of the searching out of the unsearchable.

Heraclitus and the Stoics believed that the world is ordered by an immanent [inherent of God and pervading the universe] principle of Wisdom, Intelligence or Reason. Hence the Cardinal Virtues of Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, Justice, which added to the three theological virtues: Faith, Hope, Charity, together comprising the 'seven virtues'.

Plato's 'Republic' ii,361 talks of 'the binding, scourging and crucifixion of the perfectly just man who is esteemed unjust'. 'Let him be the best of men and let him be thought the worst.'

God is therefore seen, not as an impersonal law or power, but as a personal providence.

Reason [logos], intelligence [gnome], Divine Law [nomos] and Wisdom [sophon] and the seven pillars of wisdom given us in Proverbs 9:1: 'Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars' [KJV] giving Wisdom a female attribution and underlining in v. 10 with:

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding'. [read also Proverbs 8, 22]

Drummond opines: 'The human mind has no clear understanding or aims, but the Divine mind does. While we live, our souls are dead in us, but when we die our souls are awakened to life'. Now there's a sermon or lecture in that for later on.

Poetical metaphors become philosophy and metaphysics. Man is inseparable from God - I think that is hypostasis - distinct but sharing God's unique substance, nature, omnipotence and omniscience, mirroring his moral and metaphysical perfections as in:

'be ye perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect' - and acting as his agents, not only in Creation but also in Providence and Grace.

I have divided Wisdom into two sections to try to demonstrate the way in which our personal qualities can be infused with the nature of God, both in a theoretical and a practical outworking of Him - now for us through His Holy Spirit - in our life and witness to others, through, by or within our Christian family and community.

THEORETICAL	PRACTICAL
Knowledge of philosophy of life	Prudence in managing ordinary affairs
of science, physics, chronology	skill in arts and crafts
astronomy, pharmacy, history	knowledge of the Divine Will
insight into proverbs and 'dark sayings'	practicing the cardinal virtues
capacity to see into the future of others	appreciating the input and interpretation
perception & perspicacity	
experience quantified	
Wisdom, we are told confers the noblest joys	She is:
comforts in sorrow and grief	a spirit
bestows honour and fame	alone in kind
is better than riches	manifold
is essential to rulers	distinct
leads to immortality	unharmmed
to beatitude [bliss]	all-powerful
to fellowship with God	all-surveying
	most subtle

If the last two meet in Genesis, the guile, the serpent, we may be back at square 1. Personification, then, must be studied and imbibed for our instruction and good. No wonder they didn't put some of this into the Canon of Scripture. How could they have understood what it was talking about, in those days?

Is there, I wonder, a sense in which some of this Wisdom was held in store for our new generation in order to deal with the complication of our sophisticated lives?

Not suggesting in any way a superiority of our generation over theirs, but in later retrospect much more wisdom and outworking of God's purpose for the world, has poured into civilisation and a greater gulf has been fixed between foolishness and wisdom, Man and God, evil and good.

A chance to look more closely at:

Proverbs 8,9;

Ecclesiasticus 1, 1-10 & 24, 1-34;

Wisdom 7, 25-27; 9, 9-12;

Enoch 42, 1

and to further consider:

- Source of personified wisdom;
- Canaanite-Aramean paganism; Proverbs of Ahiqar 6thC
- The beginning and development of Jewish Gnosticism

Bibliography:

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THE SACRAMENT OF SUFFERING

+David, OSJ (Wales)

Suffering is one of life's major problems. The loss of health, a loved one, or self respect can cause the sun to be blotted out. Most suffering we are told is the result of sin, our own or someone else's. It is easy to blame God when things go wrong, but we have to admit that if we put our hand in the fire we are bound to get burned.

When the Gadarene swine were allowed to go their own way they soon found out where that way ended. Suffering is a lonely experience. It is something to be kept to oneself and God.

In what spirit are we to accept it?

Are we to curse God, or to accept it as one of life's problems to be faced up to?

Suffering is not necessarily an evil. We can become its slave, or we can make it serve us for the building up of character. It can become for us a sacrament.

What is a sacrament?

The Catechism, or another definition is a summary of the principles of Christian religion in the form of questions and answers, used for religious instruction. It tells us that it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

In ordinary life it has come to mean both an outward sign and a mystery. Suffering can reveal something of what it cost Christ to redeem the world. If He turned the curse of suffering into a blessing, so must we. He never gave way to suffering. It became His servant for revealing life's potentialities.

Suffering has a great cleansing power. Whether our particular trial is mental, physical or spiritual it compels us to take stock of our lives and throw out all that is unhealthy. It awakens the soul to spiritual realities. Too often we live in a world created round ourselves, and a sense of worldly well-being grips us. Into this synthetic world suffering suddenly comes, and it tears the garment of smugness into shred, and we stand naked before something we had forgotten ever existed.

That something is spiritual reality. When suffering meets us in the way and throws us wounded by the roadside, then God can come quietly and speak the words of comfort that are so vital when the heart is bruised. Suffering often comes suddenly.

Do you remember Studdert Kennedy's lines?

“Just a little scrap of paper
In a yellow envelope,
And the whole world is a ruin,
Even hope.”

Was it our boy who was killed on active service?

How are we going to face it?

We must show the world that we believe that he is with Jesus.

Our faith may be tested to breaking point.

In those hours of darkness our closest Friend stands by. To Him we lift our hearts because He never fails when the heart is breaking.

Our suffering makes us realise that the great heart of God is the only reality in heaven and earth that never changes. He goes on loving and comforting right on to eternity.

AMEN

MORNING PRAYER

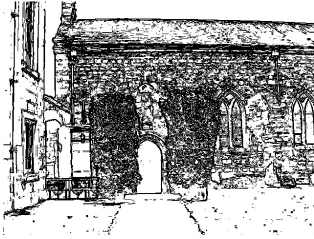
+David, OSJ (Wales)

Eternal God, it is a continual wonder that, morning by morning, I am allowed to open my eyes amidst the marvels of this great universe. From age to age, with the breaking of the day, men and women have paused to praise You - and in my own way, I do that now.

I praise You for the rising sun; for the seasons that visit the earth, each with its flowers and fruits that are a never ending delight. I praise You for living shapes and colours, all around - and never to be taken for granted.

And to match them, I thank You for the sharp cooperation of endowed senses to register appreciation and know Your gifts for what they are: things ever needful, ever changing. I praise you for stout trees affording shelter, and their tiny twigs filigreed against the sky. For the patterns of fields and hedges, and the productiveness of tilled soil.

Few of us are far from these seasonal gifts, for although we live in cities we can refresh our tired bodies and minds in walks or rides out amongst them. I bless You for men and women of the countryside, who by their honest purpose and hard toil serve Your on going Will. Grant this day, to all who tend and all who harvest, a due sense of responsibility. Deliver us all from marketing greed that holds back what others - for their very life - have need of. Above all, I rejoice that in the fullness of Time You have revealed Your heart not only in these natural things but in the changeless life and spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen



**St Leonard's Chapel,
Hazlewood Castle,
Yorkshire,
LS24 9NJ**



OSJ (UK) Services, 2022.

Unless otherwise stated:

Services usually take place on the FIRST and THIRD Sundays of each month at 6.00 p.m.

Services take the form of a short and very gentle communion service, lasting 20-30 minutes.

Regular services will restart when repainting and repairs have been completed but the chapel remains open for private prayer.

2nd January, 2022	16th January, 2022
6th February, 2022	20th February, 2022
6th March, 2022	20th March, 2022
3rd April, 2022	17th April, 2022
1st May, 2022	15th May, 2022
5th June, 2022	19th June, 2022
3rd July, 2022	17th July, 2022
7th August, 2022	21st August, 2022
4th September, 2022	18th September, 2022
2nd October, 2022	16th October, 2022
6th November, 2022	20th November, 2022
4th December, 2022	18th December, 2022

We use a non-alcoholic communion wine so children may take part. There is no requirement to be baptised or confirmed, only to treat with due respect. All are very welcome and all may receive regardless of tradition or denominational background.

Additional Services:

Remembrance Sunday:	7th November 10.35 a.m.	TBC
Midnight Mass:	24th December 11.20 p.m.	TBC