**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This booklet comprises a number of essays, in no way sequential, sometimes overlapping. They are offered to pew-sitters who might welcome an interpretation other than those normally delivered from our pulpits. Most of the conclusions are not modern nor do they claim to be original - and may be found within the welter of weightier tomes which may be outside the normal reading practice of those who endeavour to emulate Jesus.

I wish to express my indebtedness to many Progressives who have prompted new insights. My sincerest thanks go to my beloved wife, Margaret, a talented, over-worked, full-time leading practitioner teacher in a school for girls with special educational needs. That my scarcely legible scribings reach the printed page are entirely due to her technological and editorial skills.

Happily, she shares my theological viewpoint.

My contented life I owe entirely to her.

*Jack Dean, November 2014*

**COVER ILLUSTRATIONS**

A view from the pew and exterior views of the

12th Century Holy Trinity Church in Penn, Buckinghamshire,

photographed by the author.

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**1. A VIEW FROM THE PEW**

 For over seventy years I have been listening with varying degrees of attentiveness to many a view of Christianity from the pulpit. For over eighty years of exposure to that faith, I have wondered and been puzzled by the 'truths' expounded by those steeped in its theology. All too often the conclusions of my ruminations have been at odds with those pronouncements of these experts, increasingly so over recent years. I have learned that I am not alone on this seldom travelled path. So I dare to offer this collection of my musings which represent *a* view from the pew.

 When a writer puts pen to paper, it is because he or she feels the need to communicate with others. Communication is a vital component in our communal life, as witnessed by the proliferation of mobile phones. To be truly useful, it must also be a two-way business. In our church services, this aspect is totally absent. The folk in the pews are addressed as in a public meeting, the preacher allowing no questions and presuming to be enlightening, if not challenging, his flock.

 One minister began to suspect that the message which he regularly delivered might not be connecting with those to whom it was directed. One Sunday he decided to dispense with his normal homily and replace it by a brief introduction of his theme, producing a gratefully received short service. However, he then invited the congregation to discuss this theme in a less formal atmosphere over coffee. This surprise initiative was utterly rejected and the exercise was never repeated.

 Another minister used to read the Bible to the members of his weekly study group, but when a few interrupted his soliloquy to enquire about the text, they were rebuked and reminded that it was a Bible *reading* group. It seems reasonable to imagine that perhaps most regular church-goers subject to instructions based on selected readings of Holy Scripture determined by the lectionary, receive a somewhat skewed exposition of the teachings of Jesus.

 You may have wondered why many passages in the Bible are never preached upon, or questioned why certain reported sayings reveal teaching which is not consonant with the corpus of his instruction. You may have come to believe that the four gospels were the only reports of his ministry, but not told that fragments of at least twenty others have been unearthed, or that no original manuscripts have been recovered. Most of us are unaware that the letters of Paul (he wrote only seven of the thirteen attributed to him) were written before any of the canonical gospels, even though the latter precedes them in our New Testament.

 Despite over a century of Biblical scholarship, the instruction we receive every Sunday rarely reflects the new knowledge made available by those scholars, many of whom the church has done its utmost to silence.

 If, dear reader, you are among those who are content with the status quo, the following short essays are not for you. On the other hand, if you belong to the frustrated few - a quietly growing company - who find it difficult to square the Jewish perceptions of two thousand years ago with the rapidly expanding knowledge available to today's everyman, I hope you may discover in this booklet another view from the pew.

SHALOM.

**2. THE WILDERNESS YEARS**

 When we decide to differentiate between the Christ of faith defined by the church as an icon and an object of worship (both Christ and the church owe their origins to Paul incidentally) and the historic Jesus, we have to set about the task of identifying the latter. The Gospels are notoriously unreliable sources of information about this Galilean sage, but they present us with almost *all* the evidence about him. Yet, too often we read our Bibles and miss the minutiae.

 One of the events in the life of Jesus that has long been an enigma to me concerns his sojourn in the wilderness, related in the synoptic Gospels, but not in the earliest Christian writings, namely the seven authentic letters of St. Paul, nor in the fourth Gospel, written some seventy years after the event and which claims to be the work of an eye witness.

 The aspects of the episode which puzzle me include:-

* Did it actually happen?
* If it did, could any human survive for a long period without food and water?
* How could Jesus be ‘taken’ to the parapet of the Temple in Jerusalem whilst still in the desert?
* What made him undertake this task?
* How did it come to be recorded?

 Let us examine the evidence. If we discount the fictitious birth and childhood stories of Jesus and the equally fictitious accounts surrounding the origins of John the Baptist, whom Luke implies was cousin to Jesus, the first sighting of this hitherto unknown Galilean nobody is at the Jordan, where, according to Luke, he took part in a general baptism, not as a solo act as Mark and Matthew seem to hint. After this we read that Jesus went, or was led by the devil (another temptation?) into the wilderness, a fact of which we must take cognisance, since it has multiple attestations. Many scholars and clergy believe that, for at least some time, Jesus remained as one of John’s followers.

 Then it seems that Jesus experienced a shift in his position, distancing him from some of John’s views. This may have been a time of re-appraisal, which is usually best done in privacy and isolation. The concept of the desert environment as a location ideal for deep contemplation appears to have begun around 165 BCE, when Judas Maccabaeus, on the death of his father Mattathias, ostensibly the first Zealot, ‘withdrew into the wilderness and lived like a wild animal in the hills with his companions . . . to avoid attracting defilement’ (2 Macc.5:27). John himself may have chosen to operate in the desert in order to avoid contamination from the corruption of the Temple regime. We recall how fiercely he criticised the Pharisees.

 So here is a possible answer to one of my problems - Jesus went somewhere to clarify his views and formulate his life’s plan. Maybe he considered miracle-working. Complying with the wishes of the masses would also be a sure-fire way to success, both described as temptations. However, I cannot visualise him relating all these details to his hearers.

 We return to the first and chief question - did it really happen? Let us digress for a moment and recall that a mere twenty desert miles away from Jerusalem was the Qumran community, where people variously called Essenes, Zadokites, Sicarii, Ebionites, Nozrim or Nazarenes lived a communal life rather like the early Christians described in the Acts of the Apostles. By the time of Jesus, this settlement had been in existence for between one and two hundred years. It is believed that these folk, who were ‘zealous for the law’, had deserted Jerusalem, wishing to have no contact with those who distorted and corrupted their religion. Further, we have extra-Biblical evidence that a number of religious intellectuals were extant at this time and may possibly have had connections with the Qumran group. John himself may have had dealings with them.

 What if Jesus, knowing about the Qumran ‘early church’ had made his way to this ‘wilderness’ settlement and spent some time in their company, having discourse with these devout, deep thinking people? Some of these folk were all for political action (the temptation to resort to the use of power comes to mind) but this was not the way Jesus saw it.

 The gospels concur that he spent forty days in the wilderness, but we should not take the figure literally; it simply implied a long time. If he had become absorbed into the communal life at Qumran, he may have remained for some months, engaging in discussion and sharing their living (being ministered to by angels). Some of the sayings, which scholars think did not originate from Jesus, could have been gleaned whilst he lived among them.

 Whatever happened after he departed the Jordan, he came back to Galilee and began to assemble a group of disciples or learners. His method and message were obviously at odds with those of John, who, it appears, later questioned his ministry.

 We sometimes use the expression *wilderness years* which may have derived from this incident, to describe a time of uncertainty and non-achievement. Those of us who have lost our earlier enthusiasm for church going, or have given up on it entirely, may feel that we are experiencing *wilderness years*. People like us are gathering into, or searching for, groups of like-minded folk, in order to go deeper into the meaning of life than organised Christianity is prepared to compel us.

 John the Baptist required only that his hearers should ‘repent and be baptised’. This was not enough for Jesus. He exhorted those who came to him seeking the quality of life they saw in him to totally reverse their values, up-end their priorities and shun the popular road that leads to success by worldly standards.

 When we speak of faith or belief, too often we equate the word with the acceptance of a set of facts, when it really means ‘trust’. This requires us to order our lives in conformity with the behaviour and tenets of Jesus.

 So whilst it may be said that all this discussion about Jesus and the wilderness is extraneous, I believe that it should enable us to see him as fully human, like us, and acknowledge that his way leads to the creation of a better world - the fairer, more just way of the world based on the nature of what we call God.

 Since our present pursuit of wealth and endless thirst for material gain is not producing a caring and peaceful environment, an honest consideration of the ‘Jesus’ values might be a welcome outcome of our *wilderness years.*

**3. THE MISUNDERSTOOD MAGDALENE**

 When Dan Brown's 'The Da Vinci Code' hit the headlines, it provoked strong reaction among many religious people, particularly Catholics, at whose understanding of the Christian story it appeared to take a heretical swipe. That response ought not to surprise us, with its supposition that the Son of God married Mary Magdalene and raised a family.

 I was more surprised at the level of disturbance created within the non-conformist ranks. A visiting preacher at my local United REFORMED Church forcefully voiced his condemnation of the *novel* - note that word - claiming that it had no historical basis. He stated quite unequivocally that the Bible says that Jesus was not married. Despite careful scrutiny of the New Testament, I have yet to find any direct reference to Jesus' marital status. Since the Gospels, our only record of his life and sayings, portray a fully human man, is it not conceivable that Jesus would have behaved like a normal man?

 However, we do find several clues which hint at a possible married state for Jesus. Mark and Luke both inform us that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus, took spices to the tomb intent on embalming his body. In those days, only female next of kin - mother or wife of the deceased - would be permitted to perform that rite. So Mary the mother was there and might we assume that the other woman was the wife?

 This persistent woman refuses to be excluded from the band of Jesus' intimates and appears in the much later Gospel attributed to John, albeit a single attestation. Whilst seeking Jesus at the 'garden' tomb, she encounters someone she assumes to be a gardener. She responds to his enquiry by saying "they have taken away *my lord*". That was quite a normal way for a woman to refer to her husband.

 We go further. Jesus was an itinerant sage and therefore, like the much earlier hunter-gatherers, likely to have shunned the impediment of children. That does not necessarily preclude the possibility that he could have been married. In 1st century Palestine, it was generally assumed that any women who associated with roaming teachers and their retinue of men were either relatives or 'good-time girls'.

 In Jesus' day, it was customary for men to marry and raise families. We read also that Jesus was sometimes called *Rabbi* and although this may have been used as a respectful term for *teacher*, it may have been a proper attribute. This being the case, we should note that a rabbi would be married with a family, as they are to this day.

 Perhaps the Church's assumption of a bachelor status for Jesus is the basis for certain sections of Christianity to insist on celibacy for folk in holy orders. As an aside, we might note that Simon Peter, usually regarded as the leading disciple, was married and one wonders if, like the great St. Augustine, he ultimately abandoned his family in order to follow his Master. We will never know.

 So who was this Mary Magdalene and why did she become something of an irritant in the Christian story - the story in which the Church has made such efforts to underplay her role? Biblical scholars seem to accept that she was a figure of history, unlike Joseph of Arimathaea with his custom built tomb, whose authenticity is widely doubted in scholastic circles.

 It has sometimes been inferred, though without foundation, that this Mary was, or had been, a prostitute. Even if that were true, it would not have barred her from Jesus' companionship, since we read that he was often accused of keeping company with such 'sinners'.

 Luke's Gospel conveys the impression that Jesus met Mary for the first time when her sister Martha welcomed him into their home in Bethany. How then did she become known as Mary from Magdala? Whilst he was enjoying the hospitality of those sisters, Mary, reprimanded for neglecting her domestic chores, showed a keen interest in Jesus' discourse.

 As we follow the course of Jesus' life, we see Mary as a constant. She may have been a camp follower from that first encounter in Bethany, being one of the women who supported Jesus 'from their means' right through from Galilee to Jerusalem. We are given clear indications that she was never far from the action. Clearer still is the implication that she was the first person to 'see' the risen Jesus, though Paul, who authored the earliest Christian literature, never mentions this encounter.

 It is my conviction that Jesus' resurrection was neither a physical act nor something paranormal. I sense that at some moment, maybe days, weeks or even months, after the execution of Jesus, the penny dropped for Mary, when the message and mission of his life suddenly dawned on her. After all, she had hung on his words from the outset and doubtless had frequently questioned him. I can imagine the situation developing as she cajoled the disciples back from their old working lives and gradually brought these men, who we are told were ' slow to understand', to comprehend that Jesus had been calling them to action, to live his dream, to work towards realising his vision of God's realm on earth - in short, to live a new life. She had become the chief disciple, the leading exponent of the Jesus movement - indeed, the first Christian.

 I am convinced that Mary was the important link between Jesus and the first 'church'. She was probably the first person to experience the new 'risen' life we call resurrection. This change in her perception eventually opened the eyes and minds of her fellow disciples, changing them from cringing, fearful people into emboldened men and women who dared to follow their Master, sometimes to pay the heavy price as he had done before them.

 Unfortunately, women have been allowed little influence in what became the church - universal male supremacy ensured that - and male dominance is still fighting a rearguard action, guaranteed to safeguard this gender inequality in the present church, despite a growing movement for equal recognition. If the Magdalene has been misunderstood, even misrepresented, so too has the human Jesus of Nazareth.

**4. LIVING IN A TREE**

 On a sunny early autumn afternoon, I am sitting at the window of our first floor flat. The distant view of wooded hills is almost totally obscured by the thick curtain of fading leaves on a large sycamore tree a few feet away. Our view prompts my wife to tell our friends that we live in a tree. The mere mention of this type of tree immediately reminds me of a story in the New Testament. Since it is found only in Luke’s Gospel, it probably does not recall a historical event.

 Nevertheless, the story of Zacchaeus has held enormous appeal for me since I first heard it in my far-off youth. It can be found in the first ten verses of the nineteenth chapter of that gospel and features a tax collector, perhaps more precisely defined in The Five Gospels as a superintendent of taxes. Apparently he was richer than he ought to have been and had some status, but little popularity in society. On his own admission, he was not above making a dishonest buck for himself - a fact that seems to have a familiar ring today!

 Becoming aware of the stir caused by the charismatic, itinerant preacher Jesus who was passing by on his way to Jericho, Zacchaeus decided to satisfy his curiosity about this ‘oddball’. The throng of people surrounding Jesus, coupled with the tax collector’s small stature, presented a difficulty, possibly exacerbated by his own unpopularity. However, a solution to the problem was at hand when he spotted a suitable vantage point further along the route which Jesus was bound to take. A sycamore tree by the roadside presented a lofty yet discreet viewpoint.

 Not having taken into account the fact that Jesus made a practice out of associating with the discarded of society, Zacchaeus must have been shocked and embarrassed when he was summoned to come down and join in with the crowd gathered around Jesus. He must have been dumbfounded when the teacher invited himself to stay at his home - how could he possibly refuse? As a result, Zacchaeus publicly declared that he would donate half of his possessions to charity; further, he offered to refund fourfold to any he may have defrauded. Can you imagine this scenario happening in our present monetarist regime?

 This story inescapably confronts us with our self-serving attitudes. Is it possible for us to embrace the basic *needs* of others when we are so focused on our own *desires*? Perhaps the ‘glass through which we see dimly’ should be a lens rather than a mirror.

 When considering the implications of the Zacchaeus story, I cannot help recalling another story in the synoptic gospels. It is probably based on an actual event and tells of a wealthy man who asked Jesus what he needed to do to gain eternal life. Having observed all the requirements of the Jewish law all his life, he was dismayed to learn that what was required was the abandonment of the pursuit of wealth. He had missed the essence of the law. This demand proved to be too great; he could not turn his back on his present lifestyle. How different the outcome from that of the story of Zacchaeus.

 Whilst I don’t believe that Jesus was implying that one could purchase an entry ticket to a heavenly realm, he was stating quite clearly that his passion, God’s passion, was for a fairer, more just world. In his book ‘Taking Leave of God’, Don Cupitt writes “there will be no future kingdom of God on earth”. Observing the seemingly hopeless, perhaps insoluble economic plight of our times, I am inclined to agree.

 The current demonstrations against rampant and uncontrolled capitalism have placed the organised church firmly in the jury box. It has to decide whether to be part of the struggle to establish God’s realm or be drawn along by the unrelenting drive for higher living standards, cost the poorer in society what it may. With probably no more than five percent of our nation attending church regularly - and of those one wonders how many are really in the rich man’s situation - the feeble influence that Christianity has is now evident.

 In his day, the truly radical socialist Jesus must have felt that he was dreaming the impossible dream but his striving for that better world never diminished. It ultimately led to his murder by the powerful. Surely this was the essence of his sacrifice. Today we are called to come *down* out of our tree of accommodation and decide whether or not to fully accept the Jesus challenge, remembering that he is supposed to have said that ‘whoever is not with me is against me’.

 A recent television image showed police wrestling with a protestor who had blood pouring down his brow. I could almost see a crown of thorns.

**5. "TELL ME THE STORIES . . . ."**

 We came home from a most tedious service at the small church, slumped into our chairs and said to each other: "What was that all about?" Having flogged our voices through ten outdated hymns from our Sunday school days, we very senior citizens had nearly reached the point of collapse. This 'songs of praise' marathon had been anything but uplifting, with all its allusions to 'washing in blood' and little children waiting in heaven for all the other little children. To crown it all, my wife the organist, chided me for singing a wrong note, which I reminded her was not a bad score (pun intended) for a failing 70 year old memory.

 The hymns sung by an almost full congregation were delivered as lustily as could be expected from all those aged vocal chords. There appeared to be as much conviction as there would have been when they were sung last century and I could not help thinking if those singing even now realised what the words actually said.

 The presiding minister gave a talk called 'Memories and Hopes' recalling halcyon days of Sunday Schools attended by hundreds of eager children, of anniversary services with their pageants and re-enactments of Bible stories, of summer outings for children of a bygone age where living standards could not stretch to provide family holidays. My mind returned to my own Sunday School wherein we had 'pupils' who were well into their twilight years. The teacher of the men's class was a local J.P! The minister wondered what had happened to all those old pupils. Why were they not present in our churches today?

 So much for the memories, but what of the hopes? We were told that presently there were flourishing Messy Churches for the children and their parents, as well as a sort of Sunday School held on an evening in the week - a religious version of evening classes. The minister obviously hoped that this current re-run of the old days might bring forth fruit in tomorrow's church.

 He mentioned one of his mentors, the eminent theologian Karl Barth who, when asked about the essence of his faith simply quoted our next hymn: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. It occurred to me that this is pure sentimentality, a thought reinforced by his concluding statement that, as a child, he himself had not grasped the reason for Jesus' life and that it was only now, as a practising minister that he realised that Jesus died for our personal sins, a fact that we as children had accepted. Today, the doctrine of Atonement is generally rejected.

 I sensed that the preacher had encapsulated the predicament of today's church. Most adherents accept the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, rather than a collection of human attempts at discovering the meaning of life. Its contents are too often regarded as historical records. Even those who seldom, if ever, attended Sunday School have heard of Jonah's sojourn in the 'whale' and have a passing knowledge of Noah and his ark, when a cursory look at Genesis chapter 8 should raise some doubts about its authenticity. Did it rain for 40 days or 150 days? Even the Jehovah's Witnesses cannot answer that. Why, after obeying God's command to preserve from extinction a breeding pair of every bird and beast, did Noah proceed to sacrifice at least one of all the species upon reaching dry land?

 In the New Testament, some of the stories about Jesus stretch our credulity. Was he really able to walk on water, calm the storm at sea by oral command, turn water into wine, recover sight and restore to life one whose corpse was already decomposing? I suggest that the mistake the Sunday Schools made in the past was not in *telling* the stories but in not subsequently *explaining* them.

 Still attending Sunday School at the age of 16, I with three other youths of a similar age formed a class of questioning tearaways. Luckily we had a teacher, fresh from university, who was perhaps more enlightened than the average. He understood that in order to maintain our interest, it was essential to move beyond the normal Bible study prescribed. We began by reading the Rev. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead's 'It happened in Palestine' which explores the stories behind the Gospel accounts, revealing a man behind the mysteries.

 We progressed to Weatherhead's various books on Psychology and Life, Religion and so on. We discovered the connection between Christianity and daily life in community. Two of our group went on to preach and form Christian groups in widely dispersed areas later in life. In relating this to the minister, I realised that he did not accept modern theology and the results of Biblical scholarship. Thus, if the trained clergy are unable to satisfactorily link religion to the needs of modern society, what hope is there for teachers of the church children and indeed for the future church?

 Surely we must continue to tell the stories of Jesus, but we should recognise that they are stories *about* Jesus, told in a Jewish way. As far as we know, he never preached a sermon in his life. However, he did call the common folk to challenge the dominating powers who stunted their lives.

 Will we ever hear that call again?

**6. IS IT TIME TO DISCARD RELIGION?**

 Or, put another way, have religions failed to deliver that for which we created them? This question may shock many who believe that religiosity is a God-given facet of our nature. However, history seems to indicate that from humankind's earliest moments of self-consciousness, our lives have been deeply affected by mighty natural forces we are unable to understand and which are beyond our control. Such forces bring death and calamity often without warning. In our primitive ignorance, we attributed these forces to the actions of spirits and their assaults on us were caused by their displeasure at our behaviour. To appease their wrath, sacrifices had to be made.

 As the nomadic people began to settle in suitable locations and coalesced into tribes, these spirits morphed into gods, who protected them and aided them in conflicts with their neighbouring tribes. As tribes merged to become nations, these gods, sometimes several with differing spheres of influence, became the protectors of nations. Around the world, just as people from various countries looked and spoke in different ways, so too their deities proliferated.

 The tribal protective element is easy to understand. However, should an intelligent alien from space encounter one group of the world's religions, it was surely be puzzled to discover that the three branches of a belief system with a common root bore such animosity towards each other. Judaism, Islam and Christianity owe their origins to the 'father' figure Abraham, yet in our own time, we still see evidence of anti-Semitism among Christians and violent hostility between Christians and Muslims.

 Recently, a group representing the Christian Militia rampaged through the Central African Republic murdering non-Christians. Again, the medium of television was used to display a video of the leader of the rebels in Nigeria who had abducted several hundred girls from their dormitory, claiming that Allah had called his followers to slaughter infidels. We need no reminder of the Holocaust where the Nazi German regime almost completed its intention to obliterate all Jews (amongst others deemed as flawed - gypsies, homosexuals etc.), this in a Christian country.

 We are made constantly aware of an Islamic army of several thousand blood-thirsty warriors, claiming to be a new Islamic State, brutally hacking down, sometimes beheading or crucifying Christians and Muslims if these unfortunates refuse to convert to the faith. The invasion of Iraq by the Christian west has left a political vacuum, thus providing fertile ground for a Muslim uprising.

 Serge Halimi, in his article 'The New Cold War' (le Monde Diplomatique, September 2014), contends that the internecine conflict in the Ukraine is the result of the USA's tacit encouragement of that country to cultivate closer links to the European Union, thus providing an outpost for the Western powers on Russia's border. President Putin has recognised this move and has cleverly wooed the fundamentalist Orthodox Church - drawing it closer to its fellow church in Russia. Here again we see conflict within a faith system.

 It would appear that the tribal god is still with us. We simply make him the divine, all-powerful supporter of our personal or national cause. This seems always to have been the case. Missionary zeal provided the impetus for world-wide British Imperialism. Whilst it produced bountiful wealth for Britain, it managed simultaneously to uproot local religions. The religious urge (or possibly mandate) derived from the Great Commission, allegedly given by the 'risen' Christ to make the whole world his disciples, resulted in the Crusades, which took their toll of both Muslims and Jews. The desire to Christianise the world also resulted in the Inquisition, not to mention the looting of the gold and treasures of South America, which now adorn religious edifices in Europe.

 Religions have not served us well, because we have skewed them into warring ideologies. We should not be surprised that more of us are abandoning a lifelong practice of church attendance and preferring to be called spiritual, rather than religious.

 If we could be bold enough to remove religiosity from our faith, we would be left with a compassionate secular society, claims the eminent theologian Lloyd Geering. In its simplest form, the call to humanity is expressed as the Golden Rule: Treat everybody as you would wish to be treated. This basic requirement lies at the heart of virtually all of the world's great faiths from Buddhism to Zoroastrianism. Christians believe that Jesus put it very succinctly: Love your neighbour as yourself. This surely includes your enemy, as demonstrated in the parable of the 'good' Samaritan.

 In her most excellent book 'With or Without God', the courageous Canadian pastor Gretta Vosper states that 'divested of their religious elements, most world religions leave us with core values like love, justice, respect, forgiveness and tolerance'. Not a bad starting place for the re-building of society, one which might even prevent us from rendering our fragile planet uninhabitable.

**7. "WHEN I WAS A CHILD . . . "**

 So begins one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. It is found in the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. The task of copying out this chapter was the favourite punishment handed out by the Headmaster of my old alma mater to deserving pupils seventy years ago. The connection between a treatise on love and the punishment eluded me. More understandable is its regular use in the marriage ceremony.

 The sentence continues " . . . I spoke, thought and reasoned as a child." In this portion of his letter, Paul sets out to succinctly chart his own progress into full maturity. His thoughts and his reasoning informed his understanding and his speech. Certainly his 'conversion' and subsequent companionship with the early followers of Jesus drastically altered the course of his life and his discernment of what God required of him.

 As babies we arrive in the world knowing nothing except hunger, thirst and vulnerability. Those of us fortunate to be born of caring parents will be fed and cared for. As we progress through childhood and our needs increase, these too are met. We are helped to find our feet and propel ourselves, taught how to feed and groom ourselves and given guidance throughout our formative years. Hopefully, we are encouraged to be good citizens - something noticeably missing today as 'Citizenship' is on the school curriculum. We are only now realising that proper care and nurture in our earliest years determine the way in which our brains develop. Neglect in this area of parental responsibility is all too obvious when one learns of the enormous number of neglected children needing the intervention of specialist social care.

 The way we treat our children, particularly the very young, will shape tomorrow's society. We are all aware of, and distressed by, the abuse suffered by many of them at the hands of predatory adults, some of whom may have been the products of inappropriate behaviour. The training and treatment of the young begins at home, supplemented by the education system, which in historical terms is a relatively modern institution. Education is of the utmost importance and owes its existence to the church.

 One of our foremost concerns in Britain is the radicalisation of young Muslims, some of whom are converts from Christianity. Whilst we should be justly critical of this distortion of Islamic teaching, we should be aware that the same concern could be expressed about Christianity. A few weeks ago, we learned of massacres committed by the Christian Militia in the Central Africa Republic. Some of the divinely ordained activities related in the Old Testament is not dissimilar to that presently occurring in many parts of our world.

 Currently there is some debate about the suitability of promoting faith schools . One may see, for example, that people who received their education in Catholic convents find it virtually impossible to relinquish the dogma with which they have been indoctrinated. Such religious certainty resulted in the Crusades and the Inquisition. Some of us who were sent to Sunday school from our earliest years have taken a lifetime to learn that what we were told as historical truth can be understood in a very different way, as modern Biblical scholarship informs us. It is very unlikely that the benefit of such enlightenment is to be heard in the average church.

 It has long been recognised that given extensive or even exclusive access to a child for the first seven years of its life ensures a firm grounding of belief. The young, with a clean slate of a brain and everything to learn, will eagerly absorb any new information. Look how quickly they grasp and master new technology. If magic and mystery is involved, the interest is keener. As we mature, we become more sceptical about magic, trying to detect the sleight of hand. The more we discover about the cosmos, we realise that mystery is only something for which we presently have no explanation. Is it possible that Jesus used his 'miraculous' powers to attract naive listeners to hear his message? We'll never know.

 So ideas embedded in the young uncluttered mind inform our understanding of life, and being foundational they are almost impossible to modify or erase. At a recent conference addressed by Canadian pastor Gretta Vosper, based on her challenging book 'With or Without God', a lady in the audience related how she regularly talks with Jesus. I can only assume that her faith is grounded in the reality of the supernatural Jesus. It seems that the literal interpretation of the resurrection has made an indelible impression even on 21st century minds, reinforcing the persuasive teaching we received in our tender impressionable years.

 Most of us can recall an illustration of Jesus, surrounded by multi-racial children enjoying his company. We can remember the kind of songs we sang about Jesus telling them stories. These images probably derive from four verses in Mark's Gospel, believed to be the first canonical one to be written (although the incident appears in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke). The account does not mention any story telling. The sentence 'whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it' would appear to grant children special privilege. However, some Fellows of the Jesus Seminar note "Jesus' dramatic reversal of the child's traditional status as a silent non-participant, thus illustrating his sympathy for the marginalised and outcast".

 Jesus may have been saying that no-one has any more value than anyone else and should not be understood as demanding unquestioning acceptance. No-one can argue that he had no time for children, women, the poor, the crippled or blind - any whom the religious authorities dismissed. Perhaps Jesus saw in children something which we adults could profitably learn. Did he see, as we in Britain today can see, that young children of every creed, culture and class live together without prejudice. As we mature those divisive prejudices develop and erode societal well-being.

 One Sunday morning we were astonished to find a tramp sitting in the church vestibule, sheltering from the weather. Somewhat hesitantly, he accepted our invitation to join us inside the church and after the service he asked for some refreshment, which fortunately we were able to supply. A further surprise awaited us when he returned in time for the evening service. Again, he accepted refreshments but this time in the presence of the minister and many of the congregation - who not only avoided this unkempt stranger, but pointedly ignored him. I found myself wondering if we had been set some sort of test which we, as a Christian community had failed.

 In our Christian lives, we seem to need to visualise Jesus - the nearest thing to visualising God. Do we see a white clad, charismatic figure or an unwashed, taciturn vagrant? The immanent God comes in many guises, all of which call for our compassion. In her book, Gretta Vosper calls god 'something we can love . . . but it is not something that loves us'. I think that when someone shows us compassion and seeks the justice of distribution for others, we experience god's love

 Jesus' life was inspired by a vision of a just and compassionate world, as it would be if God was the supreme ruler. The way to create that kind of society was quite clearly shown by the way he lived. That same objective lies at the heart of all the main faiths from Buddhism to Zoroastrianism. If we think that kind of a world is worth striving towards, we must remember that Jesus did not offer a suggestion. He commanded us to love one another, even our enemies - a tall order indeed.

 When are we, as Christians, going to take him seriously?

 It's time to put away childish things.

 Progressives - let us demonstrate how to grow up!

**8. A FIFTH GOSPEL?**

 During a group discussion at a Progressive Christianity conference in Oxford, a lady remarked that she had heard of the gospel of Thomas, but knew very little about it. Whilst everyone with a reasonable knowledge of the Bible is aware of the four gospels, comparatively few have heard of a fifth, because, being excluded from the canon of scripture, it never features in church services.

 However, this gospel, written by Didymos Judas Thomas, the Twin and reportedly dictated to him by his brother Jesus, was deemed sufficiently important by the Jesus Seminar that it has been included in Robert W. Funk's book *The Five Gospels.* The Seminar, composed of pre-eminent Biblical scholars, meets twice a year in order to try to determine from the most ancient texts, which of the recorded sayings of Jesus may reliably reflect his words, bearing in mind that as far as can be ascertained he spoke in Aramaic and possibly some Koini Greek. The passage of time has seen his words translated into Greek, Latin and ultimately English.

 Since this Gospel according to Thomas exists, how did it escape inclusion in the scriptural canon? The reason for this omission is that when the writings contained in the New Testament were selected, there was no evidence of this gospel. How did it come to light? Towards the end of the nineteenth century, some small fragments of papyri were found in a rubbish dump at Oxyrhynchus by the River Nile in Egypt. These small pieces, not then identified, contained Greek script dating from about 200 CE and were published in 1897.

 In 1945, an Egyptian farmer discovered a number of leather-bound papyrus books at Nag Hammadi, some 150 miles up the Nile from this site. One of these books eventually proved to be the text of the Gospel according to Thomas, but written in Coptic. This seems to have been written around 350 CE. Subsequent research revealed that the gospel in its present form probably dates from around 100 CE and yet an earlier version to about 50-60 CE. If this is an accurate assessment, the original text would predate all of the New Testament's gospels and place it contemporaneous with Paul's letters. If these sayings were given directly to Thomas, this would make them more genuine then those remembered and passed down in the oral tradition to the evangelists - none of whom were eyewitnesses.

 Thomas' gospel contains no narrative, no miracles and no debates with the opponents of Jesus. It is purely a sayings record and appears to reveal something of the Cynic influence. Many of the sayings are similar to those quoted in the synoptic gospels, whilst some echo words deemed to have come from the assumed lost sayings document Q, which are used to supplement the contents of Mark's gospel in those of Matthew and Luke.

 In their examination of Thomas' gospel, the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar have conjectured that only about one third of the one hundred and fourteen sayings can be accepted as authentic. This gospel brings to light a number of Jesus' sayings not previously recorded. It is interesting to note that, for example, the well-known parable of the sower differs only slightly from the synoptic rendering, except Thomas' version lacks the allegorical interpretation of the canonical author. The theme of constant searching for meaning in life runs very strongly throughout the gospel.

 Equally strong is Jesus' insistence that God or the Kingdom is within us, that everything is open to us if we will only persist in our search. Life is to be lived in constant development. Whereas the canonical gospels seem to interpret Jesus' life as prologue to his death, the real reason for his existence (hence the church's insistence that he died for our sins), the Jesus we see in Thomas' words is one who is urging us to live fully.

 In his book *The Gospel of Thomas,* Martin Meyer says that this gospel 'spares us the crucifixion, makes the resurrection unnecessary and does not present us with a God named Jesus'. When we perceive Jesus as revealed by Thomas, we see someone fully human, totally free of the dogma of religion, imbued with the calm of someone who has learned the secret of contentment which comes from the awareness of the immanence of God.

 Whilst we have often stressed the mantra of Jesus to 'love one another, even our enemies', we have understated, perhaps even overlooked, the non-egoistic imperative, that our concern, our compassion must be unconditional. Any thoughts of reciprocity must be totally absent. We have to adopt the philosophy of giving utterly selflessly, never thinking of any return, love when that love is never returned. Jesus said even the Gentiles can love those who love them.

 The words of Jesus that come down to us from Thomas show us perhaps more clearly than the writings of the evangelists that the kingdom of God which completely filled his vision is within us, that we can live the life of eternity here and now. Somehow, this gospel has avoided the contamination of the veneers of convenient theology, which is apparent in the synoptics but most obvious in John's gospel - unfortunately the one which has been chosen as the bedrock of the religion promoted by nearly all branches of organised Christianity. The further the writing of each gospel was from the events described, the more distortion is discernible.

 The creeds, dogmas and doctrines of all churches, all of them human creations for the establishment and maintenance of ecclesiastical power, have made religious understanding and observance over-complicated, particularly in the Catholic church. This becomes very obvious when one sees in Thomas' gospel the simplicity of the life and calling of Jesus. It might be advantageous to abandon the gospels of the New Testament and rely on the brevity of the 114 verses of the Gospel according to Thomas - the FIFTH Gospel.

**9. BREAKING NEWS**

REMAINS OF JESUS FOUND

 Imagine reading this headline in your morning newspaper. Astonished, you read on: *Archaeologists excavating in Jerusalem have discovered what they claim to be the remains of Jesus of Nazareth.*

How would the world react to that announcement?

 What would be your response?

Undoubtedly, there would be many people surprised, but whose lives would be unaffected. Some might almost have expected the possibility of such a discovery. Adherents of faiths other than Christianity have always regarded Jesus as simply another prophet, not as God embodied in human form and returned to Heaven at the completion of his earthly mission. Again, some who have a half-hearted acceptance of Christianity find it difficult, or even essential, to believe in a literal physical resurrection. Such would be relieved to learn that their scepticism might have a foundation.

 Many have given up wrestling with the Doctrine of the Trinity - many preachers dodge it - of which Jesus seems to have had little knowledge. To them, this breaking news would dispel the image of the universal judge sitting at God's right hand. Jesus' exhortation to his followers to 'go to all nations baptising converts in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' was obviously a Matthean creation.

 There are people who questions the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth, since both his beginning and ending are highly problematical. Almost all of the information of him that we have is contained in the New Testament, and some of that is contradictory. Apart from that, the only contemporary references to Jesus are found in the writings of the historians Tacitus and Josephus. Josephus, sceptics might observe, adroitly switched his allegiance in the Roman/Jewish war in the second half of the first century CE when events took a turn for the worse for the Jews. His reliability is seriously compromised.

 The more scientifically minded might well request some reliable evidence about the validity of the archaeologists claim by means of a DNA test. This would be impossible since Jesus sired no descendants, as far as we know - unless Dan Brown of 'The Da Vinci Code' can trace some. His mother the 'Virgin' Mary, who outlived him, left behind no earthly remains, being assumed heavenward to become 'Queen of Heaven', according to Catholic dogma, so no DNA there.

 Let us now consider the possible reaction of the growing number of Christians who interpret the resurrection as the revelation of the purpose of the life and teaching of Jesus to those who are confronted by him. It may be said that the gospels depict Jesus' life as an extended prologue to his death, an action required by God to enable sinful humans to regain their original perfect relationship to him - which never existed anyway. However, modern thinking concludes that the crucifixion was the summary execution of a Jewish peasant subversive who had to be removed before he encouraged an unstable mob to explode into violence. Jesus had to be eliminated because of his opposition to the domination system - the sin of the world then as now.

 We should remember that Jesus' friends and supporters were drawn from the impoverished and disposable majority of society. We may be sure that he found no sponsors among the wealthy and powerful. Even Nicodemus is thought to have been an imaginary figure. The situation today, similar as it is to that of Jesus' day, calls for the same critique. His pursuit of equality and justice must be that of his present day followers.

 Many of us believe that the crucifixion marked the end of Jesus' life, but not his influence. The ugly truth of that end may be far less palatable than most of us would wish to imagine. In his book 'Crucifixion', Martin Hengel informs us that the process followed a set pattern. Those who carried out the execution would also be responsible for the removal of the corpse, usually before sundown. In some cases, the body was left as a stern warning to other would-be miscreants - and often as food for carrion. When the body, or what remained of it, was removed, it would be placed in a shallow grave and lightly covered with loose soil, leaving it easily accessible to scavenging wild dogs. It is possible that there was no body to be entombed, embalmed or resurrected, but the prospect of such an ignominious ending to the beloved master was utterly unthinkable to his erstwhile friends.

 How would that breaking news be received by others with a very different agenda? The theology of the organisation which officially propagates the Christian faith, the Church, is totally built and reliant on the resurrection of Jesus , either bodily, or as Paul explained it, in a transformed spiritual body, in either case leaving behind no human remains.

 The largest and most important foundation block of organised Christian belief is the fourth gospel, that according to John. Written at least 65 years after the crucifixion and attested to by an eye witness (although none of the four gospels were written by eye witnesses), it is burdened by the accretion of years of evolving theology, much of it heavily influenced by Greek thought, giving us a descending, dying and rising God, quite familiar to Greek and Roman understanding. Should such logic be introduced today, it would be treated with utter derision and one wonders why the Christian church clings to it.

 The philosophy of a continuation of human life into a continued, possibly transformed - into - spiritual life after mortal death now permeates all western thinking. Even people who don't feel a divine imperative to attend places of worship subscribe, maybe tacitly, to the idea that a life reasonably well lived will guarantee something better and more permanent than our earthly span provides. When we attend a Christian funeral service, we are comforted by the promise of a reserved place in our Father's house with 'many mansions', a promise that Jesus almost certainly never made. If 'no man comes to the Father except by me' as Jesus is supposed to have said, one wonders what will happen to all those faithful to other religions.

 If there is some special reward awaiting all of us or at least those deserving (or, as some have said, those who are predestined for eternity, in which case why bother to live the exemplary life?) that to me is a bonus. This future life is not something assured, nor should it be the spur to better living. In this area, I find myself to be a Christian agnostic, as Revd. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead expressed his own position. I simply don't know and I fail to see any relevance with this life which I do know and for which I alone am responsible. I share the view of Bishop John Shelby Spong who says we should live it now, live it fully, live it with wasteful love, make it all it can be.

 How has the Breaking News affected you? Has it brought a release from a nagging worry that whilst you try to live a Christian life, you feel guilty because your common sense seems to conflict with the supernatural you are asked to accept? Or has it undermined your sense of security about what will happen when this life is over?

 Should we not do better at living what we know in the most loving and compassionate way? Robert Funk proposed that Jesus deserves and even asks for a demotion, from the Christ of faith, laid on him by the church he never intended to create, to the Jesus of ministry. We owe him no less and in that demotion, we suddenly see at our own level our brother and are better able to use our time and our talents for the good of our world.

 May the breaking news break open your world to new possibilities and the vision that we can share with Jesus.

**10. PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY - QUO VADIS?**

 Many years have passed since Robert Funk, the originator of the Jesus Seminar, and Jack Spong launched upon Christendom their theses for a new reformation in the Christian church. Fifty years ago, the foundation-shaking work by John A. T. Robinson in 'Honest to God' appeared to open the flood gates allowing a plethora of books by Marcus Borg, Don Cupitt, Dominic Crossan, Karen Armstrong and others. Some clerics, including Richard Holloway and Andrew Furlong, have departed the ministry. The increase in numbers attending progressive Christianity conferences bear witness to the dissatisfaction of many adherents of the faith.

 Many of us travelling home from a church service have wondered 'what was that all about?'. Some of us, privileged to serve as officers or lay preachers within the organisation, have tried unsuccessfully to lead our fellow worshippers into a fresh approach which we hoped might be more relevant to our times. Our efforts were usually blocked by the professional clergy who, on occasion, forbad any serious Biblical enquiry. We are forced to wonder if the church has reached a dead-end - and despair of being able to breathe new life into its dry bones. Has Christianity reached its sell-by date?

 We might ask what purpose the church has. The older generation, now a dwindling few, grew up with the notion that Sunday was a non day, when nothing happened and everything except the Church was closed. A middle aged man was recently surprised to learn that nowhere in the Bible does God insist on regular Sunday worship. According to the Ten Commandments, a useful regulatory social document invented by the inspired Moses, we should use every seventh day as one in which we do no work. It was the religious control system which imposed the strait jacket of a rigorous worship regime. Jesus ignored that restriction, explaining that the holy day was for mankind's benefit.

 What purpose, then, does the church serve in our society? Christianity is supposedly built upon the teachings of Jesus, the Jew, whose life was defined by the spirit of the Mosaic law. Yet in his day, he was not perceived as a particularly religious man. He was more concerned about social justice and compassion than observance of the minutiae of that law. Robert Funk believes that he may have been 'irreligious, irreverent and impious' and the deprivations of the outsider and dispossessed was of more importance than religious observance. Christianity gained its present status when Jesus became God, a process begun around the end of the first century by the interpretation placed upon his life by the writer of the fourth Gospel. This was consolidated by Constantine's Nicene Creed in the fourth century. Since then, the dying/rising God image has been reinforced by layers of dogma and doctrine right up to the last century.

 Stripped down to its barest essentials, the purpose of the Christian church is the instruction of its members/adherents and the exhortation to strive toward the establishment of a caring and egalitarian society. Once we discover the Galilean peasant, struggling to be seen in the synoptic gospels, we may find someone whose complete humanity surprises us. A social deviant (that's why he was executed) and more political than priestly, he was more human than any of us. He laid no claim to divinity; that status was attributed to him because he was, in hindsight, too good to be human, but that is what we are called to become.

 All this, the fruits of historical-critical research over several centuries, has been available to the professional clergy, but they have failed to inform the laity. In fact, sometimes they have denied their congregations the opportunity of accessing Biblical research. In his book 'The Dishonest Church', Jack Good, a clergyman for 40 years, accuses his erstwhile fellows of withholding from their hearers what they have been taught in the seminaries.

 Some modern authors have been described as atheists, when in reality they simply don't believe in the same God that the institutional church promotes. The writer Philip Pullman, who claims not to be a Christian, rather a Jesus-ite, is among those whom Spong would call a non-theist.

 Sadly I am forced to conclude that if there is to be a new Reformation, it will not involve the organised, hierarchical church. Blind as it is, it sees no need to change. Bound by creed, dogma and doctrine, straightened by slavish adherence to the lectionary, it slows to a position of impotence and irrelevance. But what of those who still believe that the illiterate peasant from Nazareth can still speak to our present self-obsessed society? Can the 'good news to the poor' be preached effectively, and if so, how? When asked how the Christian message is to be propagated in our times, Keith Ward replied simply 'the Internet'. Whilst some, like our own John Churcher, are already doing this very successfully, many of us are dinosaurs and find the current technology beyond our grasp - and likely to get more so. The importance of personal conversation should not be overlooked - after all, it was good enough for Jesus.

 Is there another way to connect with the majority of our contemporaries who either have no access to this communication system or who have no interest in this medium? Conversation with one of our fellows will quickly elicit either a lack of interest or a complete switch-off when we use words like religion. Mention Jesus and naturally we are talking religion. Today's generation gets by very nicely without religion and to most, Jesus is irrelevant today.

 This is largely because we have separated religion from normal life. It's fine if you think praying achieves anything or if you believe that there is a God 'up there' who knows about and watches everything, keeping a scorebook to be used on Judgement Day. The church has failed to relate Christian beliefs with social behaviour. Most people have forgotten - if they ever knew - that nearly all social reform in Britain sprang from Christian conscience and the influence of a distant Jesus. If we are to make our faith effective in our community, we must convey the teaching and values of Jesus without mentioning his name.

 We do well to remember the adage 'actions speak louder than words'. The gospel Jesus asked his followers to preach was love of one's fellows, be they friend or foe. There are many whose lifestyles do not reflect their proclaimed beliefs.

 We as Progressive Christians should not be dismayed at the enormity of the task allotted to us. 'Many are called' we are told, 'but few are chosen'. Crowds listened to Jesus, we read, but only a handful followed, mostly to their cost. Jesus-ites should be recognised for their compassion and action for the justice of distribution. Most of the world is driven by self-interest at the expense of anyone else, even if it means the ravaging of our mother earth. Don Cupitt in his book 'Taking leave of God' says 'there will not be any future kingdom of God on earth, but the symbol [of this kingdom] tells that we should not withdraw from temporality and society, for the religious ideal requires realisation in time, in history, in society'. That is still our challenge.

Be of good cheer.

Progress, even in a small way, is still possible.