

# Life & Work

BIBLE STUDY SERIES 2013



**Twelve articles written by the Revd Scott S. McKenna  
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*The Sacrifice of Isaac, Caravaggio (1571-1610) Uffizi Gallery, Florence*

On first reading, the binding of Isaac by his father Abraham has to be one of the most ghastly stories in Scripture. Abraham is the 'father of us all', the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, yet what happened on Mount Moriah appears to be a catastrophic abuse of power and a betrayal of love and trust. Simone Weil says, 'To believe that God can order men to commit atrocious acts of injustice and cruelty is the greatest mistake it is possible to make with regard to Him.' Having built an altar, Abraham binds Isaac and takes a knife to slay him.

The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sachs, says that 'Reading the Bible literally is heresy.' Scripture is *faith narrative*: it is the divinely inspired Word of God which seamlessly blends fragments of history, spirituality, mythology and liturgy. God speaks to us through our imaginative and meditative engagement with Scripture. In one Jewish

poem, written around the time of the Crusades, Isaac is killed by Abraham, his blood becomes an atonement for Jews and, on the third day, he is raised from the dead. In Genesis, we note that only Abraham returns to his men and Isaac is not mentioned for what amounts to years. In a story from Jewish *Midrash*, Abraham has sent the boy to study the Torah. In another *Midrash* story, Isaac is taken from the mountain by God to the Garden of Eden. By contrast, Christians often read the story literally as a demonstration of Abraham's faith in God and detachment from the world, though without ever exploring the psychological impact on Isaac!

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In its historical context, the story of Abraham and Isaac is about child sacrifice, which was culturally accepted by many of the peoples in the Near East. Children were regarded as the property of their father; their life was in his hands. Through this faith narrative, the Hebrew people learn that there are no circumstances in which child sacrifice is acceptable: parents are the guardians of their children, not their owners.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are monotheistic faiths but in the Bible it was not always so. The Hebrew people were on a spiritual journey, as we are, and their understanding of God evolved, as ours does. In the biblical account of Abraham and Isaac, God appears five times in the first half of the narrative, that is, the word 'God.' In the second half, the LORD appears five times, that is, the word 'LORD.' In Hebrew, 'God' is the God *Elohim* and 'LORD' is the God *Yahweh*. This story epitomises the wrestling of the Hebrew people as they journeyed spiritually towards monotheism. They are wrestling with their conviction that God is a God of Justice but also a God of compassion. *Elohim* represents the God of Justice, the One who demands atonement for sin, while *Yahweh* is the God of compassion who forbids human sacrifice. In the Bible, we often read the name 'LORD God': this holds together the two primary attributes of God, justice and compassion. Compassion has the upper hand.

The One who holds creation in being does not need or desire a human sacrifice. As far back as Abraham, the Holy One calls for compassion above all else - a lesson we need to learn over and over.



*The Transfiguration, Theophanes the Greek, 1403, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow*

Scripture is *faith narrative*: it is the divinely inspired Word of God which seamlessly blends fragments of history, spirituality, mythology and liturgy. God speaks to us through our imaginative and meditative engagement with Scripture. One of the most beautiful passages in the Gospels is the story of the Transfiguration. Jesus leads Peter, John and James up a high mountain to pray. As He prays, His face shines like the sun and His robe becomes white and glistens. Moses and Elijah appear in glory. The

disciples have been asleep but, once awake, they see Christ's glory and, elated, offer to make three tabernacles or tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. The voice of God speaks from the cloud and the encounter ends with the disciples standing alone with Jesus.

It is breath-taking. In meditative prayer, we can travel to that moment on the mountain or, better, in prayer, that moment becomes an encounter in our consciousness. Practise meditation: close your eyes, be still. God breathes in your breathing. See Jesus, Moses and Elijah with the eyes of your soul. Hear the voice of God speak of Jesus.

In the Orthodox tradition, it is the disciples who have been transfigured. The disciples, perhaps for the first time, 'see' Jesus as He really is. The change is in them. They are said to be heavy with sleep but, once fully awake, they see His glory. The whole story is set within the context of prayer: the journey up the mountain is entering into contemplative closeness to God. In (silent) prayer, the disciples have woken up spiritually: Christ is born in them. In their hearts, they 'see' Him as they have never seen Him before. It is no different for us. Christ is no less present to us than He was to them.

We take for granted and often fail to appreciate the significance of Moses and Elijah. In the vision, they appear in glory. In other words, they are alive; they have been raised from the dead. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus argues with the Sadducees about resurrection. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection. Jesus cites the Torah, in which God says to Moses, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' Jesus goes on, 'He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to Him.' God has already raised Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Elijah from the dead! Jesus believed in the immense power of God to do this and He taught His disciples to trust God with their lives.

Peter's suggestion that they make three tabernacles makes sense in context. In the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, Jews remembered their forty years in the wilderness, in their tabernacles or tents, and, crucially, they remembered that God dwelt with them. The tent was the place of meeting with the LORD. Each time Moses entered the tent, a 'cloud' descended and the LORD spoke to Moses face to face. In offering to make tents, Peter wants to remain caught up in the Presence of the Holy: God is irresistible.

The cloud represents the Transcendence of God: the Divine dwells in the darkness. God is closer than our very breath, yet remains invisible, elusive and beyond conception.



*Peter and John running to the sepulchre on the morning of the Resurrection, Eugene Burnand (1820-1921), Musée d'Orsay, Paris*

On Friday 14 December, 2012 a tearful President Obama said, 'Our hearts are broken today, for the parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers of these children, and for the families of the adults who were lost.' In Newtown, Connecticut, Adam Lanza killed his mother, 20 children, six adults at the school and himself. Hiding in a cupboard, one teacher said to her class of six-year-olds 'I love you' because, she said, 'I thought it would be the last thing they'd hear.' The President quoted the psalmist: 'He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds.'

Many people do not believe in God because of the evil and suffering they see in the world. The British socialist and women's rights activist, Annie Besant, rejected belief in God because, she said, 'My conscience rebels against the injustice, cruelty, the



inequality, which surrounds me on every side.' The American scientist and atheist, Jerry Coyne, says that the best argument against the existence of God is the Holocaust. We must never minimise the depths of human sufferings. In the presence of the extreme, excessive suffering of the parents in Newtown, the only appropriate response is silence and tears. At times, the world is a very dark place.

Each year, we sing our hymns of joy on Palm Sunday and, the following week, we sing our triumphant hymns on Easter Day. Some Christians attend worship on

Good Friday when, through worship, we enter into the death of Christ but few Christians of any denomination attend worship on Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The Church speaks of God through Christ but here, on Holy Saturday, Christ is dead and Christ has not Risen. Holy Saturday is a place of the deepest darkness, where, it seems, the light of God does not shine, where Christ is absent. We do not think about this enough; we are too eager to leap to the Day of Resurrection. Holy Saturday is a very real experience: speak to the parents of Newtown. For some, their 'Holy Saturday' may be the death of a partner or child, the breakdown of a relationship, mental illness or a terminal illness. For some, it is a darkness from which they never escape.

In the Gospel of John, the first appearance of the Risen Christ is to Mary Magdalene in the garden. However, before that, the first person to 'see and believe' is the Disciple whom Jesus loved. This 'unnamed' Disciple runs to the tomb with Peter and, although he reaches the tomb first, it is Peter who is first inside. The Beloved Disciple stoops down and looks in. We are told at the outset that all this takes place 'while it was still dark.' Once inside, the Beloved Disciple, 'saw and believed.'

Scripture is to be engaged with imaginatively, creatively. We should expect God to speak to us: what is God saying to you? For me, the hesitation of the Beloved Disciple indicates the depth of his bereavement. The darkness which envelops this story is the darkness of the world, the painful experiences we never thought would come our way. The darkness also captures the elusiveness of God. The Easter message is that, though our pain is real and traumatic, God is present in the darkness. In Christ, God comes to us.

***The darkness which envelops this story is the darkness of the world, the painful experiences we never thought would come our way.***



***Christ expels the Demons into the Gadarene Swine (6th Century) artist unknown, Basilica of Saint Apollinaire Nuova, Ravenna***

One of the most challenging and disturbing passages of Scripture is the story of the demon-possessed man who lived in the territory of the Gerasenes. With His disciples, Jesus crosses Lake Galilee and, stepping out of the boat, sets foot in the Gentile region of Gerasa. Jesus is met by a demoniac. The man falls at the feet of Jesus, worships Him and, in turn, is healed. Once expelled from the man, the demons enter a herd of pigs, which immediately run violently down the steep hill into the lake and drown. It is a disturbing story.

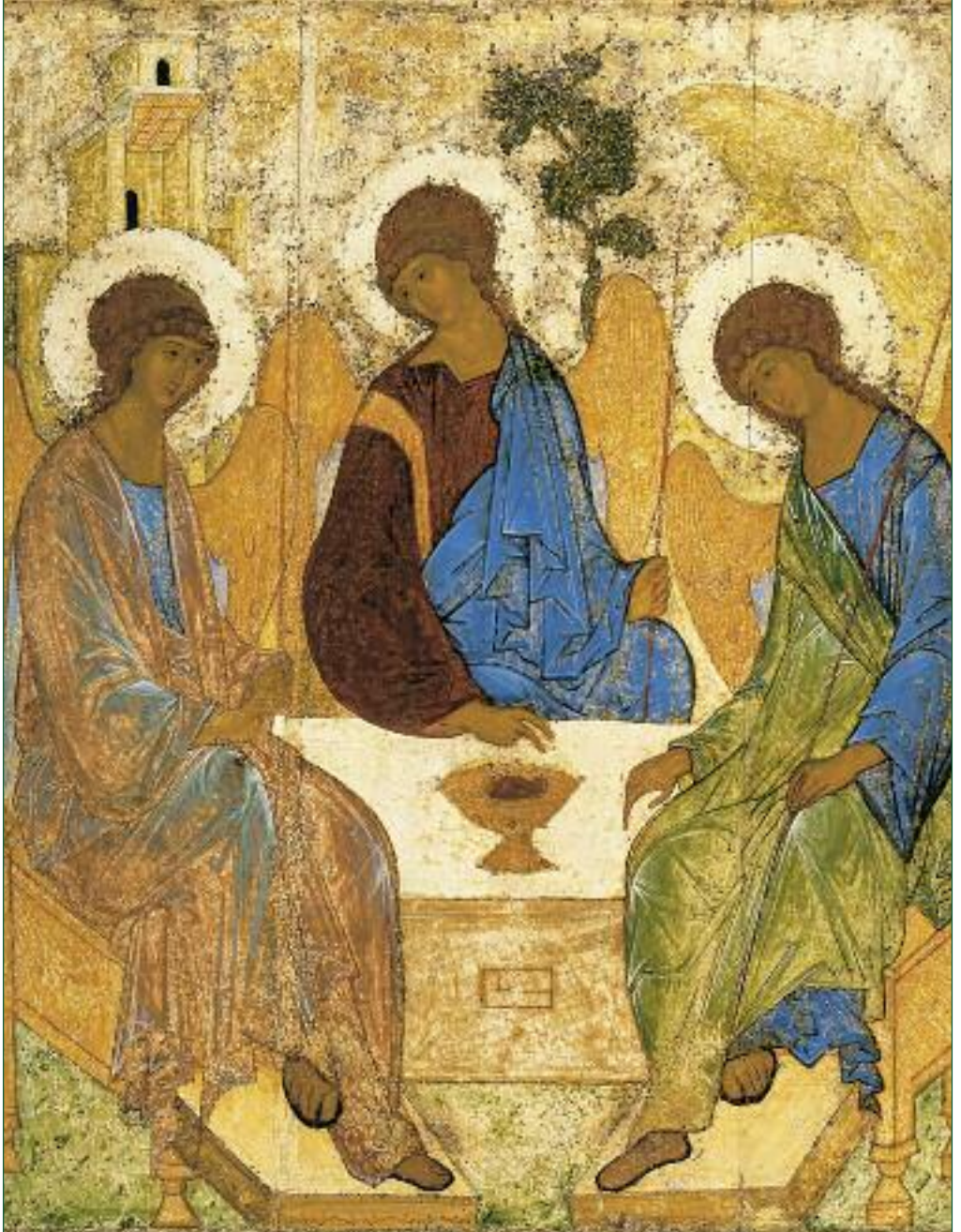
Do you believe in demons? Does it make sense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for intelligent, rational people to speak of demons? What is a demon? I doubt that it is a supernatural, malevolent being but does the concept of demon have any meaning for

us today? The story of the demon-possessed man appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and in it we are told that, once healed, the man was 'in his right mind'. We may say, then, that a person who is demon-possessed is not in his or her right mind. In human history, perhaps even in our time, there are stories from around the world of infanticide: parents who have killed their child perhaps because of a disability. Powerful parental love is overcome by a more powerful 'force'. Are such parents in their right mind? In Auschwitz, the Gulag and under the Khmer Rouge, we saw the ugly reality of diabolical forces. Were the thousands of people caught up in the energy of a destructive ideology in their right mind?

***Do you believe in demons? Does it make sense in the 21st century for intelligent, rational people to speak of demons? What is a demon?***

Scripture is *faith narrative*, which means it is a blend of mythology, spirituality, liturgy and fragments of history. It is to be read imaginatively. Jesus heals a Gentile, whose name is 'Legion', which is a Latin name. Jesus 'commands' the demons to come out of the man and, once in the pigs, they 'charge' into the lake. 'Legion', 'commands' and 'charge' are all military terms. The pigs are, in fact, wild boars. The Roman legion in charge of the area of Gerasa at the time was the Tenth Fretensis, which was later involved in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70AD. The emblem of the Tenth Fretensis was the wild boar. A first century listener to this story could not fail to notice the strong associations with the Roman Empire.

In this faith narrative, the man is said to live in the tombs or burial caves, wearing no clothes. The tombs or caves are an image of spiritual death while nakedness is an image of human vulnerability. By throwing himself at the feet of Jesus, the man in all his violence and brokenness knows he is empty inside and in need of the food and satisfaction only God can give. The Roman Empire brought colonial oppression, death, injustice and despair. It represented the political, economic and social brokenness of the world. Like all of us, the man was part of the system and was dehumanised by it. By contrast, Jesus brings wholeness and healing, and touches us with the renewing life and love of the Spirit of God. It is only when we know our own need that we can truly hear the voice of the Holy within us.



*Icon of the Holy Trinity, 15th century, Andrei Rublev*

In meditation, the doctrine of the Trinity is brought alive. It becomes a vehicle for a mystical experience of spiritual intimacy: a complex philosophical idea is transformed into a means of grace. Within the Orthodox tradition of Christianity, icons are best understood as visual representations of the written Word. They are treated with the same respect as Scripture. An iconographer can only begin to paint after prayer, meditation and fasting, and the finished work must be consistent with the orthodox teaching of the Church.

Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity is a masterpiece. We don't so much look at an icon as gaze into one. Before reading Scripture, it is best we still ourselves and are at peace in order to be ready to receive the hints and suggestions and a sense of the Presence that may come our way. So too with gazing into an icon. From this place of inner silence, gaze now into the icon of the Trinity.

The three (winged) figures are, in fact, the angelic visitors to Abraham (Genesis 18) and the tree at the back represents the sacred trees of Mamre. Rublev saw the Trinity in these visitors. The figure on the left is God the Father, the central figure is God the Son and the figure on the right is the Holy Spirit. The Son and Holy Spirit gently bow their heads to the Father. As we gaze into this icon, our eyes too are drawn towards the Father. The blue tunics represent divinity while the brown/red on the central figure represents Christ's humanity. The buildings at the top left suggest that the Presence of the Trinity may be experienced in the city as well as the mountain top. The central figure has two extended fingers confirming that He is the Second Person of the Trinity.

The three figures are seated round a table on which we see the cup of suffering. At the front, there is a space: that space is for you. The right hand of the Holy Spirit gently invites you to enter the circle. The Dutch priest, Henri Nouwen, tells the story of the time in his life when he experienced a deep personal crisis. He was broken, completely devastated and could no longer pray. Words made him cry. For hours in silence he gazed into this icon. The more time he spent gazing the more he saw and, in time, he came to realise that his silent gazing was his prayer. He felt himself embraced, enveloped in the circle of love. Broken, perhaps ashamed or riddled with a feeling of failure, Nouwen felt the Presence of the Holy around him and within.

The figures have large eyes which represents the watchfulness that accompanies love. They have small mouths because in spiritual intimacy something is lost when we try to put it into words. The climax of Christian worship is silence. Nouwen said that having gazed into the icon for hours each day there came a point that wherever he went he could, in his mind's eye, see the Trinity before him and feel the Sacred Presence around him. In the shopping centre, the high street or the library, we can enter the silent land, each moment a sacrament. That space at the front is for you.



*The Prodigal Returns*, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682),  
National Gallery of Art, Washington

The Parable of the Prodigal or Lost Son is well-known. Dissatisfied with his life, the younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance. The father divides his property and the young man journeys to a far country where he spends his inheritance

on 'prodigal living.' Broken by life, he comes to his senses and returns home. Having seen his son from a great way off, the father runs to meet him and 'falls on his neck and kisses him.' The final part of the parable is the fury of the older brother who refuses to join the feast. The parable may be interpreted in different ways.

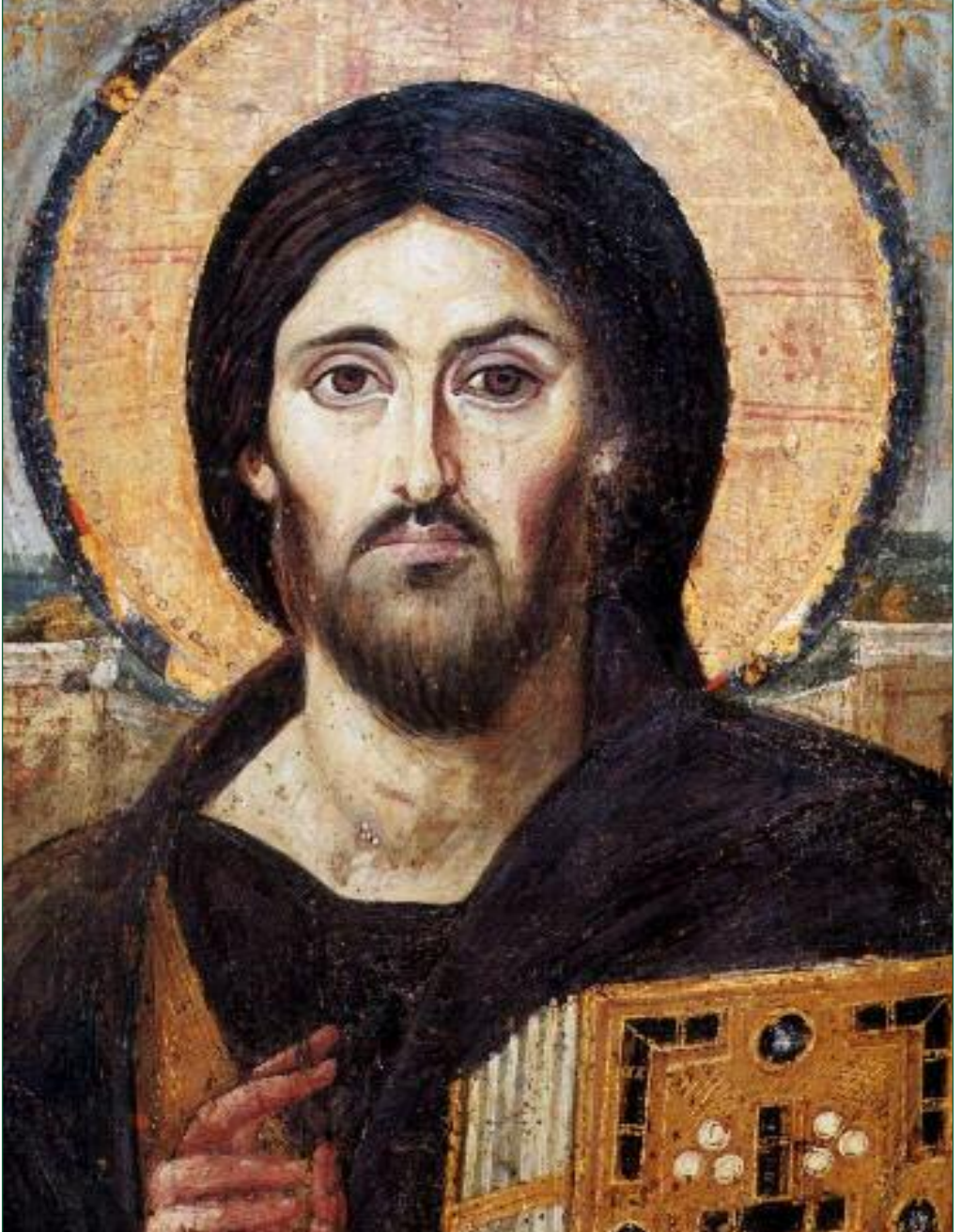
The Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, says that many a father who had suffered so badly at the hands of a son would have reacted differently. It might have been written that 'his father saw him, ran at him, and kicked him.' Some scholars say it is the 'The Parable of the Forgiving Father.' At the heart of the parable we have the striking response of the father towards his returning son. In asking for his inheritance, the younger son was, in effect, asking for his father's death. The ethical code of the time demanded that, had they seen the young man returning, the village elders would be required to break an earthen vessel over his head as a sign that the man had shattered his covenant with the community and would be offered no food or water. In running out to meet his son, the father prevents the elders from carrying out their obligation. The father 'saw him and had compassion.'

In Hebrew and Aramaic, the root of the word compassion is womb. Compassion means feeling for another human being from the very deepest part of ourselves. This is our highest understanding of God. The second century saint, Irenaeus, saw the Trinity in this parable: the Son and Spirit are the outstretched arms of the Father.

Benedict XVI describes the story as the Parable of the Two Brothers. Throughout the Bible, there are stories of two brothers: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob. This parable of Jesus adopts this genre of story-telling. The tax collectors and sinners are the prodigal son, while those who never break the commandments, the Pharisees and scribes, are the older brother. Jesus is exposing the failure of the pious to be human and compassionate. God is compassionate towards all His children.

The Church Fathers understood the 'far country' not as a physical place but an interior state. The 'far country' is interior estrangement: we have forgotten whose we are and we seek our satisfaction in what this material world offers. The Lost Son wasted all his possessions. The Greek word for property means 'essence'. The young man dissipates his essence. He has become an empty shell; his life has no meaning or direction. In spiritual terms, he is broken. In the Jewish context, working as a swineherd is the expression of humanity's most extreme alienation and destitution. This parable is about you and me.

The father calls for the best robe to be put on his son. This is the robe of grace. The feast prepared is the Sacrament of Bread and Wine, the Table of wholeness and reconciliation where both brothers are welcome.



*Christ Pantokrator, 6<sup>th</sup> century, St Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai*



Are you tired of words? Tired of prayers which take you no nearer to God? Tired of thinking about God or of being talked to about God? Tired of words when what you want is spiritual closeness, a sense of the Sacred? Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray. The answer He gave is what we know as *The Lord's Prayer* or, in the Roman Catholic tradition, the 'Our Father'.

Found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the prayer is prayed by Christians of all persuasions: fundamentalist, liberal, progressive, Congregational, Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Roman Catholic. It is Christianity's greatest prayer, yet it does not mention the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth, the miracles, the bodily Resurrection of Jesus, substitutionary atonement or hell. By contrast, the biblical scholar, Tom Wright, says, 'In a world too full of injustice, hunger, malice and evil, [this] prayer cries out for justice, bread, forgiveness and deliverance'.

The Augustinian friar, Benignus O'Rourke, tells the story of an elderly woman who had been housebound for many years with arthritis. The priest called in for a chat. 'I suppose, Brigid, you have time to say lots of prayers for us all', he said. 'Indeed Father,' she replied. 'I must confess that I don't say many prayers. You see it's like this: I begin to say the Our Father and....I think how wonderful it is to be able to call Him father. That seems so wonderful that I can't get any further. I just sit and wonder at it.' Without training, Brigid had discovered the truest form of prayer.

At its best, prayer leads us to a place of stillness in which we move beyond words to inner silence and contemplation. There is not nearly enough space in this article to consider every petition of *The Lord's Prayer*, but it is enough to stop and ponder the opening address. Jesus uses the word 'father'. For some, this may cause a problem. Alongside other terms such as 'king', 'lord' and 'judge', 'father' seems to underline the male-dominated monarchical language of the ancient world.

Drawing from Genesis, Isaiah, the Psalms and Hosea, there is nothing to stop us using the term 'Mother'. One of the central qualities of God is compassion: the root of the Hebrew word for compassion is 'womb'. God is to be imagined as a mother giving birth to life - nurturing it and feeling for her children as a mother feels for the children of her womb. However, on the lips of Jesus, 'Father', is an intimate term. In Aramaic, 'father' is Abba. It is not quite 'Daddy' as a child might say, but it is a word of intimacy in which we understand ourselves as the children of God. This is revolutionary: God lives within us; our relationship to the Holy is one of a child to a loving parent, not a distant, judgemental god lording it over us. As we move beyond words, into inner silence, we may feel ourselves to be loved, cherished and held by God.

*Lectio divina*, or divine reading, is an ancient way of savouring each word or phrase spoken gently in prayer. As the words penetrate, we move gradually into silence. Only when we reach the point of stillness will we hear the silence of God.



***Esau selling his birthright to Jacob, Matthias Stom (c. 1600 – after 1652)***

*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson was published in 1886. It was an instant success. Henry Jekyll is a medical doctor who lives in London and, for most of the story, Mr Hyde is thought to be a different person. Hyde wasn't like a man; there was something detestable in his appearance.

As the plot develops, Hyde murders an M.P., an older gentleman whom he met by chance in the street at night. Jekyll's lawyer, Mr Utterson, tries to ascertain the nature of the relationship between Jekyll and Hyde. Utterson breaks down the door into the room where Jekyll has been holed up for weeks. Hyde is lying dead on the floor. He is dressed in Jekyll's clothes. The doctor is nowhere to be found.

Finally, we learn that the monster and murderer, Mr Hyde, is, in fact, the respectable Dr Jekyll. Jekyll discovered a potion which turned him into Hyde, but this science fiction is not the point of the story. Stevenson is writing about the nature of humanity. Jekyll is a professional man, desiring to be moral and decent and craving respectability and acceptance within cultured society. In a written confession, Jekyll says that when, as Mr Hyde, he looked in the mirror he saw that evil had deformed him yet he was 'conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself.....All human beings are commingled out of good and evil.' His spiritual side 'drowsed', Jekyll lay caged in his flesh: the monster within gave him such pleasure. To overcome it he committed suicide. Jekyll wrestled with raging energies he could not contain.

The core idea in Stevenson's book has its origin in the story of Esau and Jacob. On two occasions, Stevenson describes Mr Hyde as hairy: Hyde's hands have 'a swart growth of hair' and he indulges in apelike tricks. On another occasion, metaphorically, in succumbing to evil, Jekyll yields to Hyde by showing his heels.

Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25) are twins, the sons of Isaac and Rebekah, who wrestle within the womb. The Hebrew term for this wrestling means to thrash one another with the feet. Immediately after their birth, Jacob grabs at the heel of Esau. Esau is the first-born. His name means 'hairy': 'He was like a hairy garment all over.' The story of Esau and Jacob is a faith narrative in which our ancestors wrestled with the nature of humanity. Esau is the beast within us.

Esau looks like an animal in the same way as Stevenson described Hyde. Esau is a meat eater, a hunter, while Jacob is civilised and dwells in a tent. Jacob meditates while his brother kills. Esau gives away his birth-right for a bowl of lentil stew. In this faith narrative, we read about the triumph of Jacob over Esau, of the eventual triumph of the moral human being over the animal.

We are never wholly free of Esau or Hyde, yet we can be morally mature and fill our souls with values which lead us to live as God's children and create communities which reflect those values. Jacob stands for all that is life-enhancing while Esau is about the self, tribalism and death. In Stevenson's fiction, Dr Jekyll dies; in the Bible, Jacob wins.



Satan from *The Last Judgement*, Jacob De Backer (1555-1585), Antwerp Cathedral

Is Satan real? Can we sensibly speak of Satan in the 21st century? In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter calls Jesus the Christ and Jesus replies, 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.' But a few verses later, Jesus says to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me.' Jesus had spoken about conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem and His imminent death; Peter had sought to dissuade Jesus from going to the city.

Is Satan mythology or a spiritual reality influencing events in the lives of individuals and the course of world history? Is Satan a present power pressing in on you, goading you, troubling your soul? To Jesus, Satan was a real and present threat to His mission and soul.

Satan, Lucifer or the Devil, is said to lure people to Hell. He is often depicted with horns, a tail or wings and with eyes that penetrate and terrify. In the Gospels, Jesus identifies Judas Iscariot as a devil.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is taken by the Spirit into the desert where He is tempted by Satan. Jesus heals many people who are demon-possessed. On one occasion, Jesus' own family come to take hold of Him because they think He is out of His mind and the scribes say that Jesus is Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.

In Second Corinthians, Paul writes about rival teachers with different interpretations of the gospel describing them as the servants of Satan.

The reformer, Martin Luther, believed that life was a spiritual battle with Satan. Luther said that we are like a donkey, at times ridden by God and at other times by the Devil. In the Book of Revelation we read of the great, fiery red dragon with seven heads, ten horns and seven diadems who seeks to devour Christ and make war on all who obey the commandments of God and bear witness to Jesus.

The theological problem for a monotheistic faith like ours is how to account for the presence of evil. As time went on through the Old Testament period, and in an attempt to preserve the goodness of God, the cause of evil became one step removed from God. There is a story told of King David in the Second Book of Samuel in which God urges David to take action which, in turn, leads to God's harsh judgement of David. In the later First Book of Chronicles the story is re-told but this time it is Satan who is the agent testing David.

Satan is the most intimate enemy of all, one who speaks through our inner thoughts and impulses, through imagination and desire. Satan is not a supernatural being with independent existence eager to pounce on us from without. We are moral decision-makers and Satan is the personification of the powers or forces within us which we must fight against in order to lead a life of the Spirit.

The 'Satan' within us tempts us to measure ourselves by the values of the world - wealth, status and power. Peter sought a victory the world would recognise. In the desert, Jesus faced His own inner demons. Neither church authorities nor individual Christians are free from these temptations.



*Starry Night at La Silla Observatory taken by H. Dahle*

*'In the beginning God.....'*

What do we mean when we use the word 'God'? Different people have different understandings of God. Different world faiths offer different perspectives on the Holy. In the Christian tradition, our first thought might be to speak of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, can any human concept ever be adequate to encapsulate God in God's essence? How can we speak of the Being who is not a being at all? If by 'existence' we mean what we usually mean, that is, something which is born, grows, ages and dies, then we must say that God does not 'exist'. The God who creates the universe or universes, through randomness, chance and necessity will not easily be defined by human thought. All doctrine is provisional. Like the peace of God, God's Self is beyond human understanding.

Every metaphor, image or philosophical theology is a representation of God, not God itself. God is not light, Jesus is not a lamb and the Holy Spirit is not a dove, though these terms may enrich our spiritual journey. God is always in the darkness, invisible, hidden behind our words, elusive. In his work, *Four Quartets*, the prophetic poet, T S Eliot, writes, 'I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God.' Later, he adds, 'The darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.' Perhaps darkness is the best image we could ever have of God.

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The fourth century saint, Gregory of Nyssa, said the human intellect could not know the essence of God. He wrote of the 'darkness of incomprehensibility'. Saint Symeon of the eleventh century said of God, 'I have no words to name it, for that One transcends all words.' In public worship, the master of mystics, Meister Eckhart, declared 'God is light' and the people replied, 'God is not light'. In other words, God is always beyond our best definitions and most colourful dreams.

In speaking of the Sacred, it is best to do so with humility, avoiding claims of absolute truth and knowledge. The mystical insights of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism draw us very close together. The Dalai Lama spoke of the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, as a spiritual brother and knelt at his grave. The eleventh century Sufi mystic, Baba Kubi of Shiraz, wrote of seeing God in everything: in the market, the cloister, the valley and the mountain, in tribulation, favour, prayer, fasting, contemplation and the religion of the Prophet. The more we open ourselves to the mountain top experiences in other world faiths the more we discover the One Jesus called 'Father'.

For me, the common language stretching across theologies, denominations and other faiths is silence. In mission for the twenty-first century, spiritual encounter matters more than doctrinal purity. There is no eloquence greater than the silence of God. At its best, prayer moves beyond words into stillness. Imperceptibly, silence fills the soul with a peace and intimacy in a way which words will never do. The Welsh poet, R S Thomas, wrote, 'The silence in the mind is when we live best, within listening distance of the silence we call God. This is the deep calling to deep of the psalm-writer.'



*The Good Samaritan*, William Etty (1787 – 1849), Anglesey Abbey

Jesus said, 'If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father or mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple....Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.' (Luke 14: 26, 33) This is a strong demand from Jesus and, if taken literally, few of us could meet it or would want to meet it. 'Forsake' means 'to say goodbye to'. If we were to



say goodbye to everything and everyone in our life that mattered to us, Christians would be the most divisive and dysfunctional of all people.

Similarly, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, whatever else it means, it cannot mean that we are required to stop and help everyone in need. If we acted like the Good Samaritan every day of every year, then very soon we would have no money, no energy and our life would fall apart. Where is the morality in that?

Scripture is a tapestry of mythology, spirituality, theology, liturgy and fragments of history. In this call to follow Him, Jesus invites us to a different way of seeing, thinking and living. He was a Spirit person, a mystic, a man for whom experiences of the Holy were frequent. He taught His disciples to see and feel the Presence of God; He spoke of the Transcendent, the Holy, within us. This spiritual insight is liberating. Each moment is transfigured and this world is seen against the backdrop of a deeper, more profound, spiritual reality. The material world is transient, temporal and, ultimately, unsatisfying and unfulfilling. The invitation to 'forsake' all is a call to see that the material world is not our home.

The tapestry of Scripture points us to the Mystery at the centre of all creation. It is in the consciousness, in the mind and soul, that we encounter the Holy. We can touch Transcendence in this life and be touched by it but it requires no law-breaking miracles, no belief in a supernatural, external deity and no suspension of our reason and intellect. Jesus calls us to a deeper way of seeing reality.

What does Jesus' call to 'forsake' all mean for the churches today? Like many people, I have been moved by the pastoral sensitivity of Pope Francis and inspired by the prophetic leadership of Archbishop Justin Welby. For myself, 'forsaking' all means stepping away from the model of Church we have inherited from Christendom towards a pilgrim Church, which walks with respect alongside other faiths, empowers followers of Jesus to encounter Him through the practice of stillness and silent prayer, understands historical doctrine as signposts on the way rather than absolute truth, and encourages us to have confidence in a non-literal interpretation of Scripture in a Darwinian and post-Enlightenment world.

Spiritual history is inner history; it is in the consciousness that we encounter the Spirit of Jesus. The more we centre ourselves in God the more we begin, slowly, tentatively, to see the world differently and think and live differently. Perhaps 'forsaking' all means forsaking or seeing as provisional all images of God, for God is always beyond our comprehension, better than our most beautiful dreams. The master of mystics, Meister Eckhart, said, 'What is today? Today is eternity.'



*Nativity, Jean-Baptiste-Marie Pierre (1714-1789), private collection*

Scripture is the blending of myth, spirituality, liturgy, theology and fragments of history. It is a rich tapestry intended for prayerful meditation. Pulling together poetry and prose, from the teaching of Jesus, the rich tradition of Judaism and the mythology of

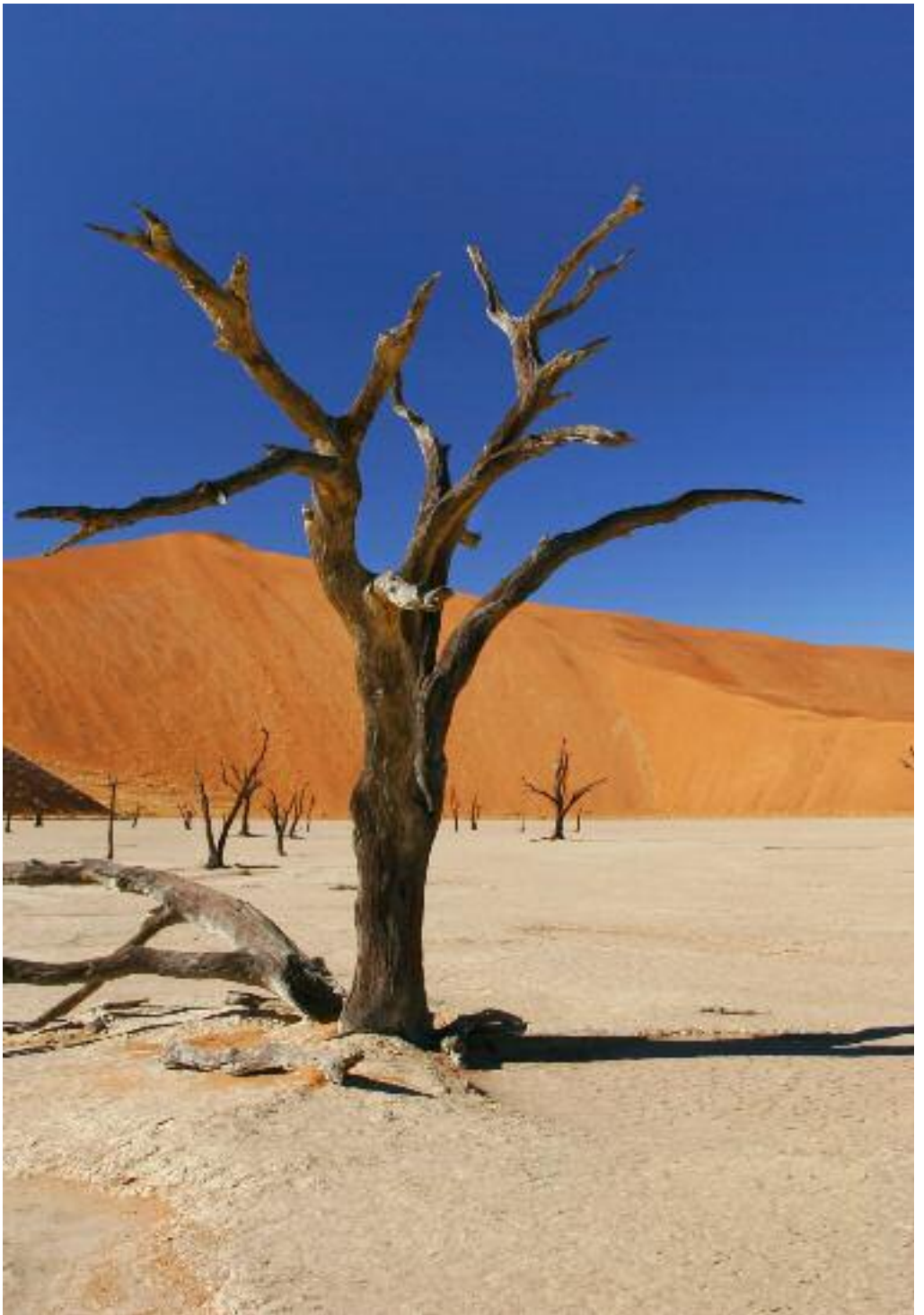
the near East, the biblical writers continually point us to the Transcendent, the Holy, in our midst. At the roadside, on the hillside and face to face with His disciples, Jesus taught that 'The realm of God is within you.'

A Jesuit once asked a Hindu guru about prayer. The guru said, 'The air you breathe is God. You are breathing God in and out. Be aware of that, and stay with that awareness.' *Breathing is prayer.* In the Book of Genesis, *Adam*, that is, humanity is brought to life by the breath of God. It is only with God's breath within us that we become living beings. More important than doctrine or the institutions of religion, prayer and, in particular, silent prayer is a doorway into the Sacred. In moments alone, in our home, in the park or in church, cultivating an awareness that God breathes in our breathing creates inner stillness. Prayer becomes encounter: our stillness fills with the silence of God. In prayer, silence takes us deeper into God than words alone.

The Christmas stories of Mary, Joseph, the Babe in a manger and the shepherds and wise men are well-known. Found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, they are myths or legends told to convey truth. The German writer, Thomas Mann, said, 'Myth is the way things never were, but always are.' The Birth narratives celebrate the unshakable belief of the early Church that God is glimpsed in Jesus of Nazareth. We know this to be true: the myths hold a truth. It is an incomprehensible certainty. The late Poet Laureate, John Betjeman, wrote, 'And is it true? And is it true, This most tremendous tale of all, Seen in a stained-glass window's hue, A Baby in an ox's stall, The Maker of the stars and sea, Become a Child on earth for me?'

Perhaps my favourite Birth narrative is found not in the Bible but in a book about Jesus, written probably in the second century AD, called the *Proto-Gospel of James*. The book was known to the early Church Fathers and was enormously popular in later centuries. It too tells the story of Jesus' birth. In the region of Bethlehem, Joseph finds a cave for Mary. He leaves his older sons with her while he goes in search of a midwife. While Joseph is walking into the village, everything suddenly stops. The birds of the sky are halted in mid-heaven, workers reclining to eat have their hands arrested midway to their mouths, a shepherd on a hillside and his sheep are motionless, and goats standing with their mouths open over water are not drinking. For a moment, everything stands still. When everything returns to normal Joseph knows that the Birth has happened in the moment of absolute stillness.

The myth of the Incarnation and the teaching of Jesus tell us that in this life we can touch and be touched by the Transcendent. We can taste 'heaven' and intuitively sense our eternal home: God is born in us. It is a miracle!



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