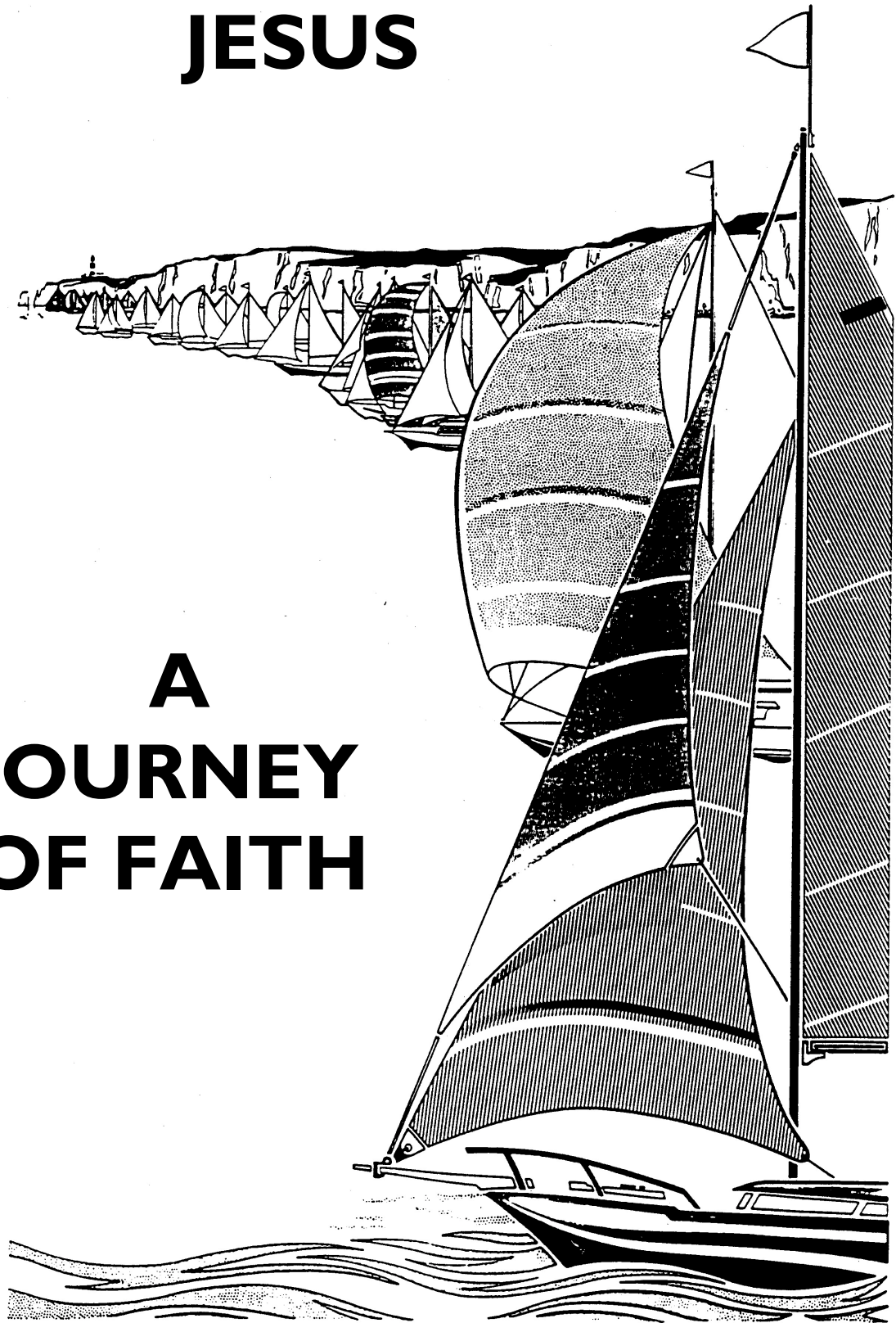


FOLLOWING JESUS

A JOURNEY OF FAITH

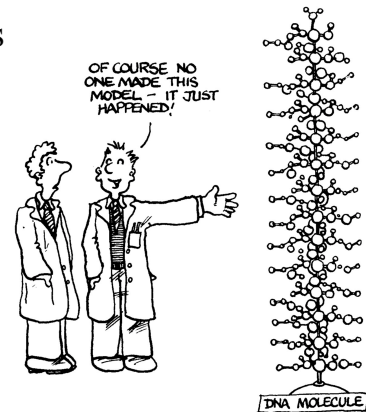




JESUS – WHERE DO WE START?

We start with God. If you are reading this it is likely that you would say that there is a God. You know that some would disagree but you would still reckon on God. Perhaps part of the reckoning would include the following:-

- There must be something behind all that is
- Things have a design – there must be a designer
- Nature is too beautiful to be here by chance
- There must be more to life than what we see
- It's a gut feeling
- What better way can we explain what is



Now we can't actually prove that there is a God but the above points may encourage us to say – “Yes there is a God.”

We hopefully can go further and say, “I believe in God”. The reason for this will be because we have some experience of God, in some way he has revealed himself. Now no one has actually seen God but we do believe that in some way he shows himself. Can we identify with any of the following ways in which God may reveal himself:-



- Through creation. Have we ever felt a sense of awe and wonder at nature? Many people have felt God's presence in the world he created. Its beauty and majesty reveal God's beauty and majesty.
- Through conscience. Where does our sense of right and wrong come from? Does God

not speak to people through their conscience and that conscience is developed through biblical teaching

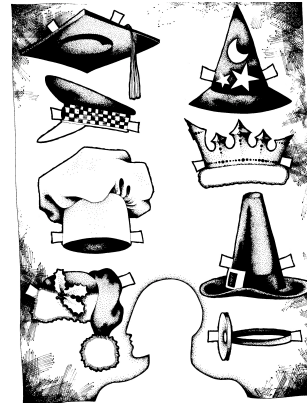
- Through experience. Sometimes we have experiences that make us think, “Where did that come from?” God can speak to us through our everyday life – the people we meet, the things that happen. These experiences could be dismissed as coincidences but God may be speaking to us through them.
- Through the bible. Many people in their openness to the bible indeed discover it to be, “The word of God” – God speaking to them here and now.
- Through prayer. Again when there is the offering of prayer people do experience in a meaningful way God influencing them.

So through what they have experienced people can declare “I believe in God.”

Mind you they may still have their questions and honest doubts may occur. We cannot face up to the mystery and mess of life and not at times question. The issue of suffering has even in biblical times caused people to question. We should remember that believing and having faith does require us to go on when we do not have all the answers.

Now while no one has seen God, we all can see him or think of him through different images. Here are some of the ‘hats’ we might see God wearing:-

1. The teacher’s hat
2. The policeman’s hat
3. The chef’s hat.
4. The Father Christmas hat.
5. The magician’s hat.
6. The king’s hat.
7. The Puritan’s hat.
8. The doctor’s hat.

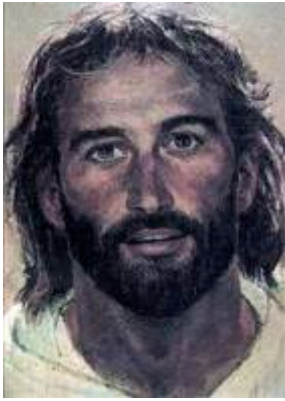


We might also add the judge’s hat and the shepherd’s hat.

The image that is most fitting and helpful is the one used by Jesus himself – that of Father.

Many words can be used to describe God – almighty, all knowing, holy, omnipresent, and merciful but the description that gets to the heart of the matter is simply, “God is love.” Surely if we grasp that we are greatly encouraged – love ultimately pervades the whole of the universe!

Despite the ways we have mentioned that God reveals himself we may still find it hard to see God, to know what he is like.



We have not, however, mentioned the supreme way in which God reveals himself. He has given us Jesus – “Want to know what I am like just look at Jesus.”

Jesus himself said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father,” and the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets but in these last days he has spoken by his Son. He is the exact representation of God’s being.” (Hebrews 1:1-3)

And it is to the person of Jesus that we turn next.

CONSIDER

1. What would encourage you to say that there is a God?
2. Can you pinpoint any experience when God seemed to reveal himself to you?
3. What picture do you have of God?
4. Why is it some times difficult to grasp that God is love?



JESUS – WHO IS HE?

Think of famous people living and dead.
How do we know about them?

How do we know about Jesus?

History books
The Bible
The Church

- The history books tell us that he definitely existed and that he died on a cross.



- The bible tells us a lot about the history of the Jews, how they got on with God and how they looked forward to better times when God would send them a special person to help them.



The followers of Jesus came to realise that he was this special person and in the bible we hear through them what he did and what he meant to them.

- At first the followers were only a few. Yet their story caught hold. It spread and has continued to spread till today it has reached to every country in the world. The church has continued for 2000 years, has had millions upon millions of members and is growing in some parts of the world today.



Jesus existed. He has had a tremendous influence on the world – more than maybe anyone else. So who is he?

Well in one sense he was quite ordinary – rather a nobody. Home town not up to much, parents unimportant, limited education. And he did a fair bit of eating (Luke 5:29/30) and sleeping (Mark 4:38), walking and talking (John 9:1) and like all of us he got tired, he got angry (Mark 3:5), he got thirsty (John 19:28) and he could have a good cry (John 11:35). And he seems to have had a sense of humour (Matthew 7:3-5). He was in one

sense just an ordinary bloke – as human as you and I. We know something about his friends but little about his hobbies or how he got on with the rest of the family. Relations seem to have been a bit strained (Mark 3:20-21 and 31-35).

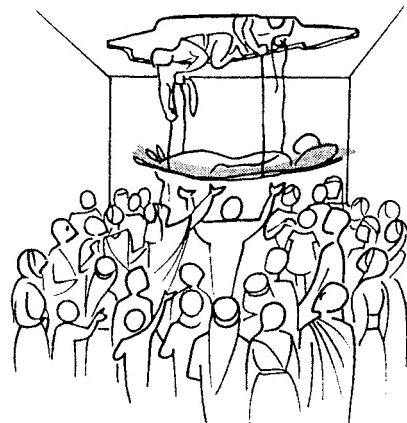
Yet he was different. Age roughly 28 he abandons everything and starts wandering about the countryside. Did you ever wonder where he kipped down?

The amazing thing is that crowds began to follow him. Now premier league football clubs or pop groups may draw crowds. Why this nobody?

He was healing people



He was performing miracles



He was teaching



Teaching! Surely that put everyone off. Evidently not. He had a way of telling stories which caught and amused them. And they had to listen. There just seemed to be something about him. He was unlike other teachers. He really had an authority about him which was strange since he was a nobody (Mark 1:21-22).

And the crowds were drawn because –

He was one with them – he seemed to understand them and affirm them. He seemed also to have a way with the marginalized, lepers (Luke 17:11-19), tax gatherers (Luke 19:1-10), prostitutes (Luke

7:36ff), beggars and blind (Luke 18:35-42). He did not think too much of the establishment (Matthew 23:13ff). Indeed he was a match for them much to their annoyance. No wonder they wanted rid of him (Mark 12:14-20).

What really makes us sit up are the wild claims this Jesus makes –

- Jewish society was held together by law. It could not be changed. Yet Jesus quite calmly claims he can change it (Matthew 5:12 and 22).
- And he makes staggering statements – ‘I am the way, the truth, the life’ (John 14:6) and lots of other equally astonishing words (John 6:35, 8:12, 10:11 and 11:25).
- And he claims a very special relationship with God
I and the Father are one
He who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:8ff).

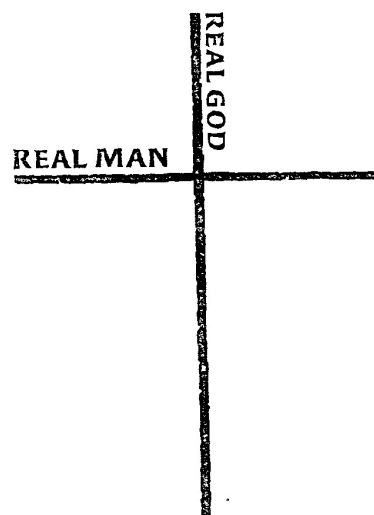
Such claims from a nobody – he must have been mad.

Yet he always appeared quite sane, quite in control.
He did have that note of authority, that air of truth.
And he commanded all that healing and all those stories were impressed upon so many minds.

Could it be true what he was saying? Surely it had to be considered. He was from God. The Son of God. Sharing completely in our humanity but yet divine.

CONSIDER

1. What is your favourite story about Jesus?
2. What do you like about Jesus?
3. What might have put people off following him?



**Jesus Christ
Real God,
Real Man**



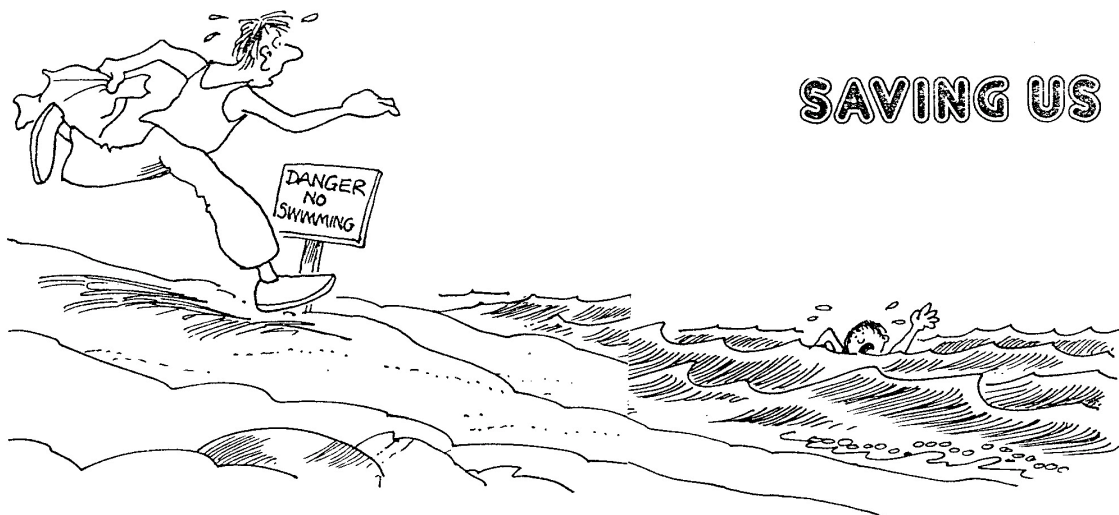
JESUS – WHAT IS HE DOING?

It's quite a story – the story of creation at the beginning of the bible. What it's really saying is that God was behind and is behind everything that exists. It's like a drama unfolding – the seven days of creation. God said ... and there was ... and God saw that it was good. And at the end – God saw all that he had made and it was very good.

Pick up a newspaper, watch the T.V. It's clear all is not very good. There is bad in the world, in our community in Northern Ireland and yes in ourselves. Something has gone wrong. God's good creation has become stained or marred. The bible to explain this tells the story of Adam and Eve and their disobedience, and introduces us to this fatal flaw – Sin. It's a small word but it has big consequences – thus the brokenness and hurt of so much of life today.

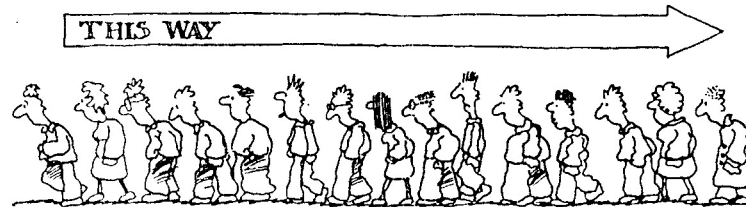


And God as a heavenly Father does not like to see his creatures making a bit of a mess of things and getting into trouble. He must sort things out – save them from the bad in themselves which was dragging them down and save them for the good which was his original intention.



SAVING US

It seemed like mission impossible. Sin was ingrained into people and they showed no signs of changing. At first the plan didn't go very well. He decided to choose a special people the Jews as a spearhead to win over the world. While at times they were keen on this role they were quite often a hindrance. Simply they followed their own interests rather than God's. He did try sending special agents (prophets) to galvanise them and put them back on track but it didn't really work.



A radical approach was now required. Daring action had to be taken. If these humans were imprisoned in their broken world by their failing they needed someone to get right down into that cell to befriend them and someone who could overcome the imprisoning forces, break the gates and someone whom those prisoners would follow out.

The plan was daring –

Stage 1

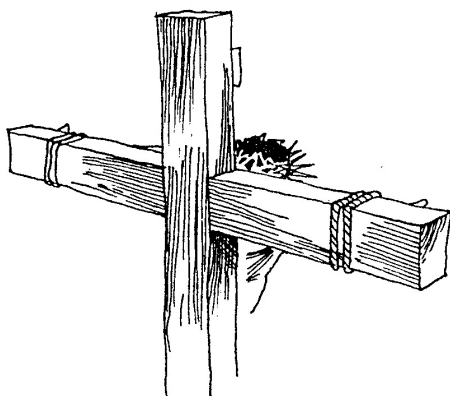
God would actually become one of these humans. Such an idea had never been considered before. God lowering himself to that level. Far more dramatic than going from the English Premier Division to the local Saturday league. Almost like a human being agreeing to become a wood louse.



God was willing to let go of his position and come right down to our level. He would then truly be with us. And so he was born in the baby Jesus – God with us and sharing what it was like to be a human.

Stage 2

Equally daring and almost outrageous. God in Jesus, in order to defeat evil, would not set himself up as a king and demand people's support. He would simply serve others and teach others to do the same. He would go on giving of himself till in the end he would give his own life. He would allow himself to be crucified. Now this seemed madness and indeed defeat. But it



did not reckon on the wisdom of God. He used the evil inclinations which brought Jesus to the cross to turn the tables on evil itself. There was a twist to the story. Evil seemed triumphant but ended up defeated. Evil did not break Jesus – he never ceased to love. Instead Jesus broke the hold of evil. It might have brought him to the cross and grave – he left it in the grave as he broke out from that grave into new life. The Resurrection confirms that the cross was victory not defeat. God was fulfilling his plan through that horrible cross on what was indeed Good Friday. The cross then is not minus – it is the most wonderful plus sign there is.

If we are in any sense imprisoned, if we feel held back we now know that we have someone to be with us and befriend us. That is good. Even better we have someone to lift us up, to release us. Jesus can be friend and saviour.

His Living

His birth was hard and humble. Soon a refugee escaping the violence of Herod. His ministry was rough and ready – as he said himself ‘no where to lay his head’. He was at the level of ordinary people – a man for the people even if he annoyed the authorities.

He was very much with people – he understood what was going on in their lives, what they needed.

He befriended outcasts.



His Dying

The prospect filled him with horror.

The suffering before and on the cross.

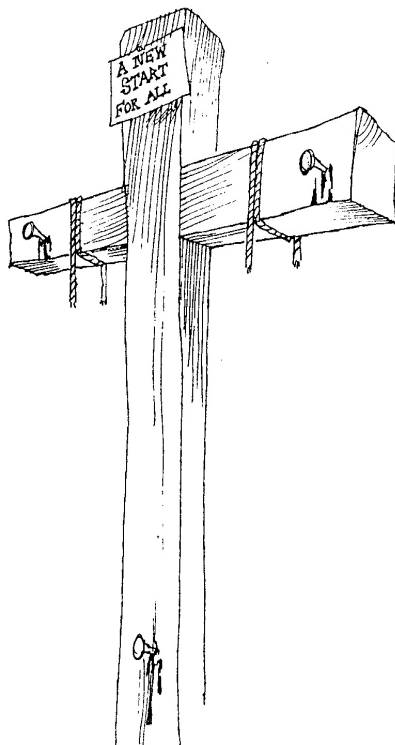
The loneliness and shame of the cross.

The hidden weight of sin he carried.

Yet he went through all of this for you and I.

He saved us because:-

- i. He took our punishment upon himself – just as he took the place of Barabbas.
- ii. He broke the hold of evil – evil did not break Jesus.
- iii. On the cross he embraced the whole of hurting and flawed humanity and in love soaked up all the hurt to provide healing. This wonderful love inspires us.
- iv. This is awful Friday but also Good Friday – confirmed by Easter Day.



His Rising

No dead body can be found.

There are many witnesses to seeing him alive in a new form.

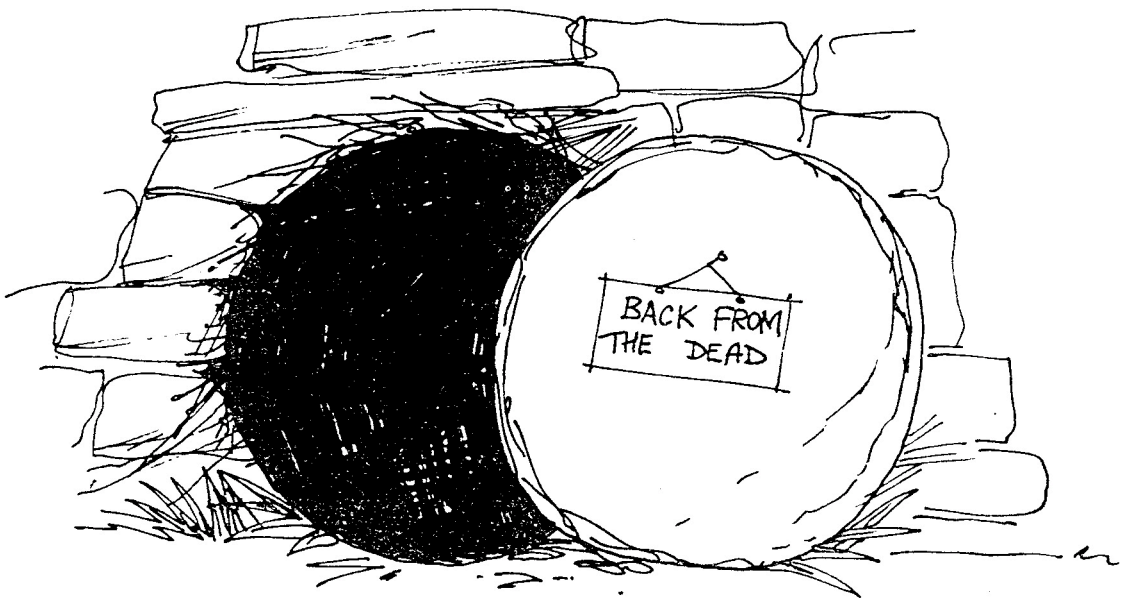
Broken fearful disciples are changed into bold enthusiastic missionaries.

The Church bursts out into the world and proclaiming a crucified and risen Jesus grows rapidly.

The 'Sabbath' is changed from Saturday to Sunday.

Christians are Easter people – their motto is new life.

**What is Jesus doing – living, dying, rising.
He is befriending, saving and giving new life.**



CONSIDER

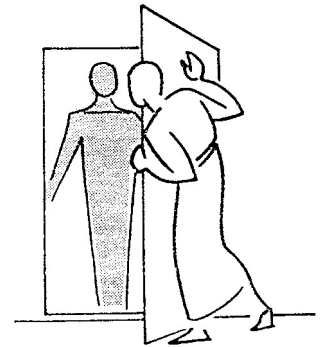
1. In what particular ways do you feel infected by sin?
2. To what degree do you think the world is sick?
3. Can you think of an act of letting which in some measure illustrates the humbling of Jesus in coming to earth?
4. How does the cross speak to you?
5. Why do we worship on a Sunday?



JESUS – WHAT DOES HE WANT?

Let's look at a few pictures:-

1. A picture in St Patrick's Church and also found in Revelation 3:20.
Jesus wants to share a meal in our homes. He wants to give us his friendship. Little me with all my limitations, he wants to be my friend – and no better friend could I have.
2. A picture from St Luke's gospel (Luke 14:15-24). He wants us to come along and enjoy a marriage feast.
Jesus talks a lot about kingdom life which we can begin to enjoy now but we enjoy to the full later.



This picture of the marriage feast gives us a flavour of the kingdom as something lively and enjoyable.

And the invitation is thrown wide open – you don't have to be 'good enough' or have the right qualifications to attend.



3. Another picture from St Luke (Luke 11:15-21). He wants us to appreciate a father's love and forgiveness and again to enjoy a party.

What a positive picture of God – always loving and not holding failings against us.

These pictures point to the Good News Jesus wants us to hear and accept.



God loves you and me.

He accepts you and me as right for his kingdom – he cancels all our failings/sins.

You and I don't have to qualify (we never could) – we simply have to accept or trust that we are already accepted.

Good News indeed summed up in the scripture – *Saved (brought to health) by the grace of God through faith for good works.* Eph 2:8-12

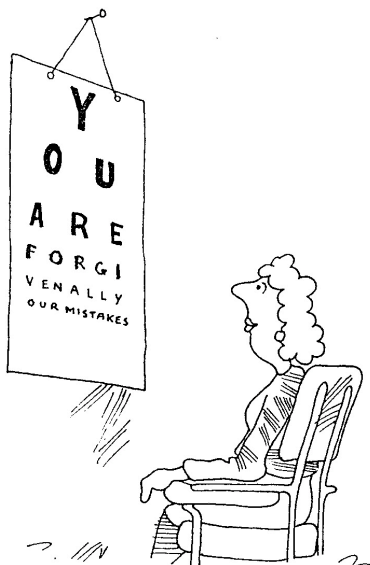
We can never by trying to be good win our way into the kingdom. Yet when he is so gracious to us in accepting us into his kingdom we try to show our gratitude by doing what would please him.

Yet this good news is lost on us if we consider ourselves as quite good people and thus deserving of a place in the kingdom. We are not grateful to God, nor do we value the life and death of Christ.

If, however, we know we are not very good people and are only too well aware of our limitations, its good news indeed if our sins are not counted against us because of what Jesus did, and that we are actually accepted.

Jesus – what does he want? His first words in St Mark's gospel tell us. The kingdom of God is at hand – repent and believe the good news.

- He wants us
- : to enjoy kingdom life
 - : to do so by recognising the failings of our present life and wanting something much better.
 - : and by accepting what is now good news - the failings do not count because of Jesus – we are already accepted.



CONSIDER

1. In what things in life do we have to prove ourselves 'good enough'?
2. "I'm not a Christian – I smoke and drink." What do you think of that statement?
3. At the heart of the Christian Faith is good news – what do you think this good news is?



JESUS – WHO WILL HELP?

The Holy Spirit

The disciples very much appreciated having Jesus with them during his ministry. After the drama of his death and resurrection they were ready to bring the good news to the world.

But Jesus was leaving them – he was returning to his Father in heaven.

How would they manage without him? Who would help?

Jesus, however, had everything in hand – the Father would supply a replacement who would be like Jesus, indeed would be the Spirit of Jesus.

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth” John 14:16

So when Jesus ascended into heaven the disciples waited expectantly for his replacement.

We read of the coming of the one who came to be known as the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-13.



The disciples came to realise that just as Jesus was of God, so too his replacement.

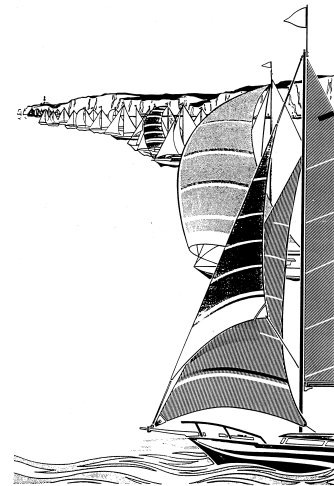
The Spirit was not a thing or a force but being of God had a personal nature.

And yet he was not like the earthly Jesus – he didn't have a physical body and was not confined by time or place – he was the spirit of the living God abroad in the world.

He was and is very real – the presence and power of God active in the world and available to you and me.

The word used for spirit is the same word as used for wind.
The image of wind in connection with the Holy Spirit can be useful

- Wind is invisible but very real – so too the Holy Spirit
- We witness the effect of wind – so we see the influence of the Holy Spirit
- Wind can be a gentle breeze or a mighty storm – the spirit can work in quiet or strong ways
- We cannot control the wind, it acts on us – so too the Spirit
- Wind blows where it will – just like the Spirit



The word translated spirit also has the meaning of breath
We associate breath with life and the Holy Spirit is described in the creed as ‘Giver of life’

One hymn has these lines

*“Breathe on me breath of God,
Fill me with life anew”*

We can think of the Holy Spirit as the One who helps us to be more like Jesus, who enables us to live the Christian way

Within this role the Holy Spirit helps us in the following ways

- Helps, encourages, counsels John 16.7
- Shows us wrong and right John 16.8
- Teaches us and opens up the truth John 14.16,17,26 and John 16.13
- Empowers us for life, service and witness Acts 1.8
- Prompts and guides us Acts 16.6-10
- Helps us to pray Romans 8.26
- Opens us God’s Word
- Encourages unity. Ephesians 4.3-6. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit
- Provides gifts 1Corinthians 12.1-11: Romans 12.6-8: Ephesians 4.11
- Assures us that we are God’s children. Romans 8.14-17

The Holy Spirit In the World Today



As we enter upon the Christian way we are not left to our own devices.
The Holy Spirit is there for us to help us.
We need to believe in the Holy Spirit and to be desirous of the spirit.

The great Christian cry is “Come Holy Spirit”

The bible exhorts us to “be filled with the Holy Spirit”

We need to put up our sails to catch the wind of the spirit – however it may work in our lives

Challengingly scripture tells us that we can know how active the spirit is in our lives by the fruit it produces – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. Galatians 5.22-23.

CONSIDER

1. Is the Holy Spirit the unknown member of the Trinity – Father Son and Holy Spirit?
2. In what ways might you have experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in your life?
3. How might you raise awareness of the Holy Spirit?



JESUS – WHERE TO NOW?

We can't ignore Jesus.

After all we've all heard of Jesus and since he lived 2000 years ago that means he's made quite an impact.

We do have to think about him and decide for ourselves.



- We could dismiss all this talk about Jesus as rubbish but there are facts that we can't avoid and surely the experience of millions of sincere people over the centuries and today must be recognised.
- We could say he's all right for some people but not for us. Maybe we doubt all the good things that are supposed to come from following him. Sometimes junk mail suggests we are bound to win the big prize in a draw. We bin it – we don't believe it, there's really no chance of us benefiting. Maybe we approach the good news of Jesus in a similar way – we don't really believe that we could benefit. Yet countless people have benefited. Are we ready to declare that God is fooling with us? Does our experience confirm that he makes false promises?
- We could feel that we are not bothered. Life may not be great but its bearable – we'll just leave things as they are. We'll not bother to make the effort required to respond to Jesus. We may feel that there is something in this Christian religion but we're too lazy to find out. Yet we shift ourselves for other less important things – are we prepared to miss out on a deeper quality of living?

- We could decide to learn more and to journey further to say with one biblical character – ‘I believe, help my unbelief. Special times in life may prompt us to this decision.
And God is pleased when we try thus to appreciate the good news.

Thinking of the ‘door knocking’ window in St Patrick’s (Rev. 3:20) our response may be:-

- Too busy, or too locked up in our own lives to hear the knocking.
- Hearing the knocking – not being willing to open the door.
- Opening the door but keeping it on the chain.
- Opening, but blocking the door entry ourselves.
- Standing back and saying ‘Come on, on in!’

If we’re ready to invite Jesus in, if we are ready to get to know him what steps might we take?



- Accept him as he accepts us.
- Belong to his family. Here hopefully we get to know him better.
- Read his book. We hear the good news – how he is very much for us. The bible is not an easy book. We may need help with the reading.
- Pray to him. Through talking and listening and simply being open to him our friendship with him is developed.
- Try to live under his care considering what would be pleasing to him.
- Think of doing specific things for him.

We hear occasionally of people who have had, for instance, an old vase sitting outside their kitchen door, holding a few flowers. By chance the person discovers that it is in fact a Ming vase, of great worth.

Not long ago in Dublin it was discovered that a painting that had hung in the house of a religious order unnoticed for many years was in fact by Caravaggio and was worth millions.

Sometimes objects are dug out of bogs and it is only after layers and layers of dirt are removed that some object of great worth is revealed.

We know Jesus – he has been there in our community for a long time but maybe we have not discovered his value.



We know that at Christmas we give gifts because God gave the gift of Jesus. He gives Jesus to us and he is a very good gift.

We need to accept this gift, unwrap it and use it.

It would be sad if we left the gift lying on the ground.



And so to:

- Bible reading.
- Prayer.
- Worshipping.



JESUS – WAYS TO KEEP IN TOUCH

THE BIBLE

Revelation

God reveals himself supremely in Jesus. He also reveals himself through the bible and of course it is primarily through the bible that we learn of Jesus.



The bible speaks of Jesus as ‘The Word made flesh’. The bible itself is ‘The Word of God’ – not just what God spoke or revealed in biblical times but God speaking to us today. Thus we call it ‘The Living Word’.

The bible puts us in touch with the living God who indeed can change us and enrich our lives – indeed give a new dimension to life. This has been the experience of countless millions through history.

The Old Testament points forward to Jesus or promises a Saviour
The New Testament proclaims Jesus as Saviour.
As we accept Jesus and enter on the Christian way we can then be nurtured in faith through the truths and teaching of the bible.

The bible is not just great literature from humans – it is inspired by God. It is ‘breathed out’ by God and a variety of human writers were sufficiently in touch with God to assimilate the material and write it down for the benefit of humankind.

“All scripture is god breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that God’s servant may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

The bible then is revelation breathed out by God, not bright ideas about God dreamed up by men and women. It is thus immensely profitable and is why all churches regard it as the supreme authority in Christian faith.

MESSAGE



The word bible simply means ‘the books’ Thus the bible is really a library of books. There are 66 books and these books are of different types, written by different authors and at different times. The remarkable thing is that all these books are held together by a constant theme and consistent message – ‘The Lord is king’. God has all things under his care and though there is a brokenness through the whole of creation which hurts God he, as a God of love, longs to draw that creation and especially humankind back to himself and is indeed in the process of fulfilling this purpose.

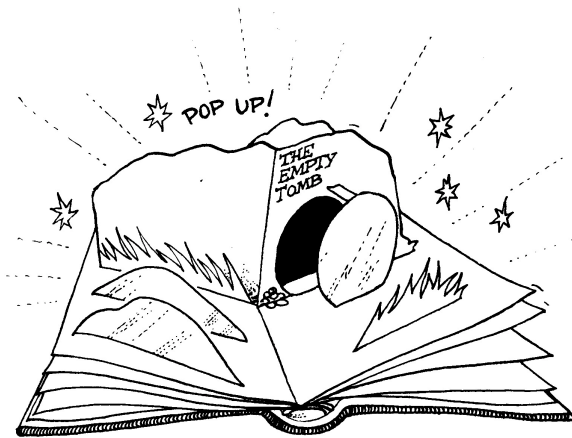
The Old Testament falls into 3 main sections:-

1. The Law or the first five ‘books of Moses’ – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These contain the account of creation, how God was behind everything and that there was goodness at the heart of creation. There is the account of the brokenness of humanity, called the fall, and thus the need for redemption or restoration by God. This begins with the calling of Abraham and a special people the Jews. The early history of the Jews is outlined culminating in their release from slavery in Egypt, their journey to the Promised Land and the giving of the law or covenant under Moses.
2. The Prophets fall into two divisions: the former prophets made up of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, and the latter prophets comprising Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and a collection of twelve shorter prophecies. Establishing themselves in the Promised Land the history of the Jews unfolded at first in a single kingdom and then in the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The ups and downs of that history are matched by times when the people ignored their God and times when they repented and sought to follow him. The prophets were God’s agents to challenge the people with messages of judgement but also with promises of restoration. Within all of this was the hope that God would intervene some day in a final form – the hope of a Messiah.
3. The writings contain the rest of the Old Testament – such books as the Psalms and Proverbs

The New Testament falls naturally into 4 sections:-

1. The four gospels – the coming, life, teaching, death, resurrection of Jesus are brought powerfully before us
2. The Acts of the Apostles. The exciting story of how the gospel and the church spread across the known world in 30 years

3. The Epistles. Letters from the first Christian leaders to individuals and some to churches. These reflect the significance of Jesus and the implications he has for the Christian community
4. Revelation – a highly pictorial book written for those who were suffering for their faith and lifting hearts to grasp the ultimate victory of good and something of God’s future.



Engaging with the bible

In some parts of the world people would give anything to gain access to scripture – it is so highly valued and seen as life giving.

Too often where it is readily accessible it is ignored. Many in our communities have a limited knowledge and understanding of the bible.

While the bible can be hard to understand, while we have to work hard at engaging with it and while it can be disturbing and challenging – ultimately it is good news (the meaning of the word gospel) – attending to it will indeed be fruitful.

How we should engage

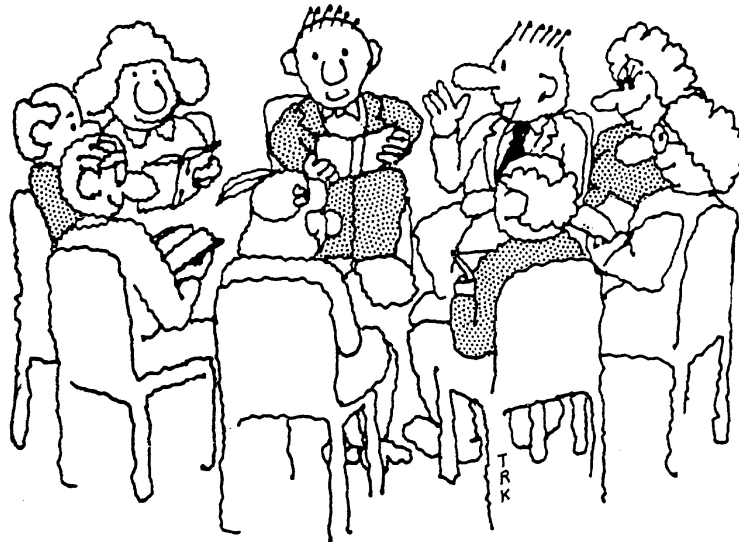
- Humbly. We are not over the bible but under it. We cannot pick and choose and apply it as we would want. We need to listen humbly
- Expectantly. God will come to us in some way and ultimately he is for us.
- Honestly. There will be things we don’t understand. We may have moral difficulties. We may have to wrestle with different interpretations. What we cannot appreciate at the moment should not keep us from the message that is clear.
- Imaginatively. We try to put ourselves into the shoes of those of whom we are reading.
- Attentively. It is not about a hasty read. It is about time and effort.
- Obediently. What we hear we need to practice in our lives
- Regularly. As with other food we need to feed regularly and to persevere in our reading even through dry periods. God will not ‘jump out for us’ each time we read. Over time faithful reading will indeed enrich our faith.



Practicalities

- We try to find time and to make it a regular time
- We use a modern translation
- We ‘get on line’. We engage as above but especially we seek to be open to God
- We engage with a particular piece of Scripture. Maybe we will decide to work our way through a particular book. Maybe we will search out a particular story or piece of teaching. One of the gospels is a good place to start. We may decide to use bible reading notes which will give us the particular passage and then make comment on it. We might also get a bible commentary dealing with the particular book to aid us in our study
- Having engaged with a passage we may well want to ask a few questions:
 - What struck me as I read?
 - What new insight might it give me of God or indeed of man?
 - What might this passage be saying to me?
 - What might I take away as a “thought for the day”?

While we need to study the bible as individuals it is good if we can also study it with others in a bible fellowship or a house group. We learn through the teaching given and the insights and experiences of others. We also can encourage one another and enjoy fellowship. As we are all learners there is no need for anyone to feel inadequate as they join with others.



CONSIDER

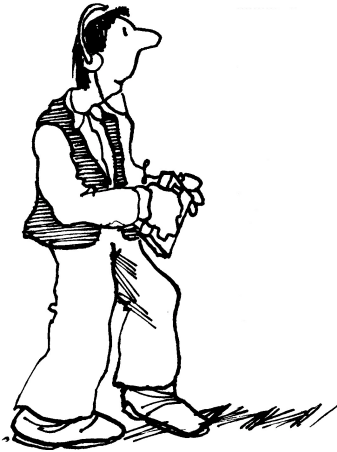
1. Why do some people go to great lengths to get hold of a bible?
2. What has been the place of the bible in your life?
3. What is your favourite passage in the bible and why?
4. Why can the bible be seen as a dangerous book?



JESUS – WAYS TO KEEP IN TOUCH

PRAYER

Throughout history mankind has in some measure prayed. Most people today might admit to having uttered prayers at some time. Even many non church people pray regularly. It has been said “*The reason why we pray is simply that we cannot help praying*”



What is prayer?

- It includes talking with God
- Communicating with God – there is also listening
- Keeping company with God
- Being open to God and that could be in the whole of life

Any connection with God is prayer. It does not have to take a particular form or reach a certain standard before it is proper prayer

Why pray?

- Most immediately because we need help or we want to express thanks
- Communication is important for any relationship – if we want a relationship with God prayer is vital. It is good to share with God
- We may come to value prayer as a means to let our true selves be loved by God. We might see prayer as lying in the sunshine of God’s love
- We pray so that God may encourage us, maybe challenge us in our faith journey and indeed change us
- Jesus prayed, asked us to pray and assumed we would pray

Growth in prayer

Any prayer is valued by God. However he appreciates when we grow in our prayer life – when we are not using as adults the same prayers we used as children.

As we grow in our prayer life we will find ourselves attending more to God and moving more from self centeredness to God centeredness. We will be talking less at God and instructing him and be more open to God constructing us. We may be able to more and more let the true me be exposed to the true God

Ways of praying

It is good to try to set aside a regular time for prayer – however short. When some discipline is established we may then come to appreciate a longer period.

We will generally pray alone but as we come to value prayer we may want to join with others. In worship we obviously pray together.

While we may have a regular time of prayer we can also shoot “arrow” prayers up to God at any time prompted by something that we experience. Also we may come to appreciate simply being quiet with God

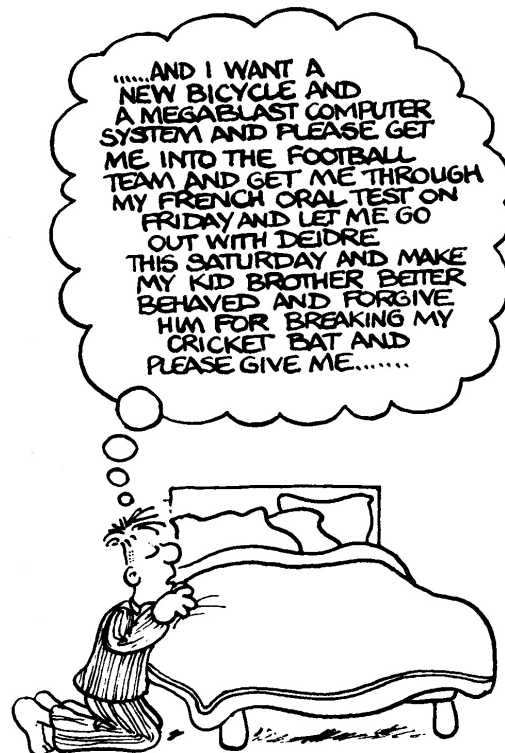
Again we may try more and more to live our lives in an awareness of God and how he may connect at any time.

There may also be places where we feel especially near to God and prayer is alive.

Types of prayer

Our prayers can often primarily be made up of asking. There is much more to prayer.

- Adoration – where we simply say “God you are great” and we get excited in our praises
- Confession – we just say “sorry God”
- Thanksgiving. Called as we are to live thankfully this should be reflected in our prayers
- Supplication. Here’s the asking bit but not just for ourselves and our own but for the wider church and community



These together give us the word ACTS.

We can also think of the hand of prayer with praise, confession, thanksgiving, asking for others, asking for ourselves as the five fingers and then the main part of the hand the palm as the listening prayer

It is good to consider the following and try to be:

- Regular and disciplined. Not just praying when we feel like it or have a particular need
- Persistent. Prayer is not always easy – many people who take prayer seriously do have difficulties and we can run into dry periods when there seems little life in our prayers. God appreciates when we still come to him even if we are not in the mood or have little to offer
- Balanced. Not just stuck in one mode of prayer
- Relaxed. We can get over concerned at the quality of our prayers. We can relax before God and just be ourselves. Maybe we will want to picture ourselves sitting beside another in a quiet place and chatting.
- Honest. If we want to shout at God we should do just that. We cannot hide from God how we feel.
- Humble. As we come before God in prayer “on our knees” in attitude if not in body is where we should be.
- Focused. Looking in the right direction and tuned in. Yes our thoughts will wander but we try to refocus and retune
- Faithful. We trust that as we pray God is there, that he values this communication and that he will use our prayers for good. Our prayers are never wasted, they never dissipate in nothingness.



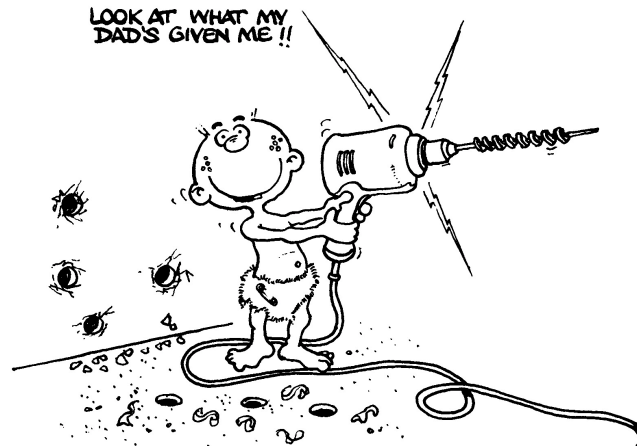
Sometimes we may wonder about the need to pray if we see it as just asking and if we think that God knows anyway what is in our mind. However we do not pray to tell God what he needs to be reminded of – he already knows and cares and simply waits for us to care with him through the prayer we offer.

The effectiveness of prayer

- Prayer is never wasted but is always valued and used by God even if we cannot see the outcome
- The more care we put into our prayer the more God has to work with
- Prayer is not about pressurising God but presenting to him our care and trust
- What we are talking about in prayer is not so much changing God but ourselves – not so much about getting what we want but about becoming what we should be. *“A person prays not so much for god to be instructed as he to be constructed”*

All the same we may wonder at times why, when we ask in prayer as Jesus instructed, we do not apparently receive an answer to that prayer. This may cause us difficulties. Some things may be said:-

- Maybe we are not facing in the right direction and the prayer cannot get through. Maybe we are not in any sense turned to God or maybe there is a big blockage in our lives which we are happy to remain there
- It could be that unknown to us our prayer is not in the best interest of ourselves or others
- It may be that while immediately we cannot see an answer into the future we will recognise that good has come out of the situation. It may be that God does answer but in his own way and in his own time
- Could it be that God takes the care of our prayer and uses it for good in some other situation unknown to us
- We may not have any satisfaction in the face of our questioning. All we may do is offer our trust to God and leave it with him. This is difficult but it may be what God wants so that he can mature our faith.



The reality is that we some times will have difficulty with prayer but this need not put us off. Even if we feel that our prayers are very limited and the spirit in which we pray is limited we should never the less keep on – offering the best that we can if whatever state that we are. We can also draw encouragement from the fact that it is not just up to us. Our most immature prayers have an inbuilt enhancer – the Holy Spirit. Romans 8.26 tells us that when we are struggling with prayer the Spirit is there within praying for us.



A basic encouragement for us all – Keep it honest, keep it simple, and keep it up.

CONSIDER

1. How would you rate your communication with God?
2. Do you know if people around you pray?
3. Can you identify a time when God clearly answered prayer?
4. What difficulties do you have with prayer?



JESUS – WAYS TO KEEP IN TOUCH

WORSHIP

Many people do not feel the need to go to church to worship. They may claim that they can worship God at home or on the golf course or at the beach. They can indeed do this but often the challenge is – do they?

Yet while we can worship as individuals we do also need to worship together. So yes we do need to go to church and some of the reasons for this are:–

- The bible knows little of individual religion but much of the religion of a community and this includes worshipping together. The Old Testament is all about the people of God and the New Testament about the Church, the community of believers.
- Jesus regularly worshipped with others and through the history of the early church as recorded in the New Testament the emphasis is on togetherness and this includes in worship. There is also a warning that people do not neglect their meeting together in worship. (Hebrews 10:25)
- Together in worship we can support encourage and challenge one another. We can learn from others and we can be carried by the wider faith of the church.
- Without the discipline of meeting together we can not only miss out on much but we can also slip away from our faith. A coal can burn brightly when it is along with other coals in a fire but if it is set out on its own it may soon dim.



- If we belong to the church we belong to a family. Like any other family we will do things as individuals but we will also meet together for some aspects of life. So it is with worship.



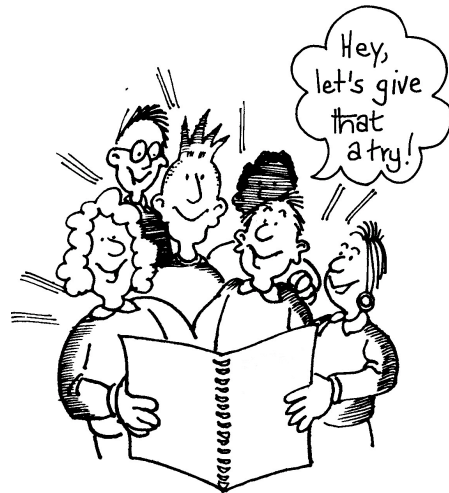
Things can be said about worship which will help make our worship a more meaningful experience

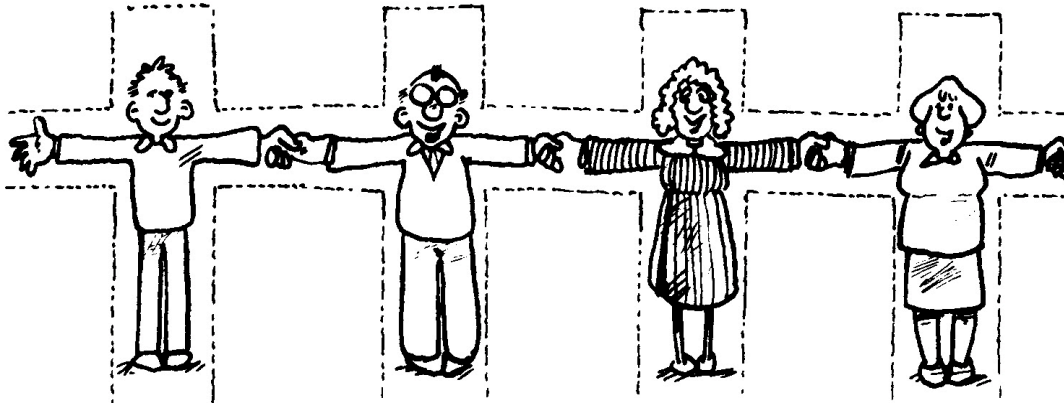
1. The meaning of worship. The word itself comes from 2 words which give the ideas of creating and of worth. So we might say that worship is concerned with creating a fuss about the worth of God. Although it may seem obvious we do need to remember that worship is about God and that our focus in worship should be on God. Maybe some times we come to church and go home without any attention to God! We may need to think less of just going to church and much more of actually worshipping
2. The WOW of worship. It is quite exciting, daunting, mind boggling to come before God in worship – and the WOW can stand for **Worthy Of Worship**
3. The preparation of worship. In practice we may fall into church at the last moment flustered. It is good if we can in some measure settle ourselves for worship and focus ourselves.
4. The order of worship. In the Church of Ireland most of our worship follows a definite order and is laid out for us. This has certain advantages
5. The work of worship. The technical word for the format of our services is the liturgy and this word means the work of the



people. Worship is not primarily about what the minister does but about what all the people of God gathered do and it can be helpful to see that we need to work at our singing, praying, listening, and participating.

6. The drama of worship. There is interaction among the players; there are different tones of voice, different moods and different actions and movements
7. The richness of worship. There is a great richness contained in the words of our worship services – we need to recognise that richness
8. The biblical nature of worship. Although we may not realise it most of the contents of our worship services originate from the bible
9. The balance of worship. It is good if in our worship there is a spirit of homeliness but at the same time a spirit of holiness.
10. The hospitality of worship.
People will have different likes and dislikes as to what goes into worship. It is important that we are hospitable towards the likes of others and that we do not fight worship wars
11. The offering of worship.
Although we may talk about what we get or don't get from worship it is helpful to think of going to church to offer our worship and to see all that we do in terms of offering. Thus in some measure giving we may indeed receive
12. The spirit of worship. Some times our worship may seem rather dead and some times very much alive. We pray that we may approach our worship in the right spirit but also desiring the Holy Spirit to encourage and enthuse us in our worship.





CONSIDER

1. What part of worship do we appreciate most?
2. Do you feel a balance is kept between homeless and holiness?
3. "I like to go to church – it makes me feel better". Would we identify with this?
4. "I can worship at home without going to church". Would we have an answer?
5. Can we sometimes leave God out of worship?