

The gift of life is not just one gift, but a treasure trove. As we open our eyes each day, such wonderful sights and sounds can delight us – the changing sky, each day different. The wet dew on grass, the song of a bird, the wind in the trees. All creation in constant motion as God is at work. And how often, how many days, do we fail to notice God's hand, the presence of Christ.

St John speaks of Christ there at the moment of creation. In the beginning was the word. St Paul talks of Christ in creation. This is God's immanence in all creation.

When we listen to a piece of music we learn something of the composer. Different performers may interpret the piece in different ways. Later composers may use it as a basis for their own compositions. The creation is set free to change and develop, but always the creator's creative spark is there, in the music.

So too with the natural world. Creation is set free to change, evolve, develop. The psalmists knew this:

Psalm 65: the pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.'

Or the start of psalm 66: make a joyful noise to God, all the earth, sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise.'

Yet we can fail to see God's presence.

Forgive us Father, for we know not what we do.

Not to notice is one thing, but to destroy is far worse. We eliminate all those plants that are inconveniently in the wrong place. We control every moment of the lives of those animals we use as food. Yet the bible teaches that Christ will bring all creation to enjoy the glorious freedom of the children of God. Nothing that is created should be abused.

Forgive us Father, for we know not what we do.

How did we get to this blindness?

We treat the gift of life so carelessly.

And yet still God gives us an even greater gift.

Blessed are you Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to set before you, which earth has given and human hands have made, It will become for us the bread of life.

The gift from God is presented, but it is more than simply a food offering, it embodies Christ's sacrifice, so that when all share this bread, all can share in his promise of salvation. The cost of this offering is borne by Christ but shared by us, since it implies a covenant, an acceptance of a gift that, as with any acceptance of a gift, implies a duty of response, of thanks, of appropriate behaviour.

This echoes the Passover feast, when the lamb was slaughtered. It was a lamb that belonged to the group. Reverence and ritual was attached to its slaughter, its cooking and the sharing at the feast. The gift from God was presented to God and shared by all. The cost, while undoubtedly mostly borne by the lamb, was also to some extent shared by the owners of the flock.

In both these examples there is an understanding of gift. Gift *from* God. Gift *to* God. Gift shared *with* God.

In some ways, this is reminiscent of the money my parents used to give me before Christmas when I was a small child so that I could buy presents for the family. The presents were always the same. A Giles cartoon book for my brother. A packet of manikin cigars for my father (those were the days when smoking was not so frowned on as it is today) and a box of chocolates for my mother. The chocolates were always shared.

The whole procedure was conducted with the utmost seriousness. I was allowed to go by myself to the corner shop. There was the ritual of wrapping and hiding the presents until the great day. There was the pretence that no-one knew what they were. There was implicit trust that this was how I would spend the money. There was also the trust – my trust – that the chocolates would indeed be shared.

All we have, our food, our clothing, comes from God, shaped by human hands. It may or may not be shared. Thanks may or may not be offered. But there is certainly an associated sacrifice. The poor are crushed. Those members of the animal kingdom that are more vulnerable than us are exploited and abused. And there is the invisible, often unlamented - to use the military term - collateral damage to the environment. Life is diminished.

To revert to the analogy of my Christmas gift money, it is not even as though I had taken the money from my mother's purse without asking, and bought chocolates which I ate all by myself. It is rather as though I has also taken all the money that was intended to buy the week's food for the family, and spent it all on luxuries, frivolities for myself.

We have little concept of "gift" - no reverence or awe at the *cost* of our continued existence - no recognition of our total dependence on other life for our survival.

Forgive us Father, for we know not what we do.

And today we come to the foot of the cross.

A man, Jesus, crushed and dying. But, so many men have died in agony. A man killed by the Jews and authorities. There are many men unjustly killed by corrupt states. The Son of God on the cross, that one day long past in history. That is something else, a gift whose cost cannot be measured, a gift whose cost was borne by Christ. If we accept that gift, it requires humility and faith.

It was that and yet even more than that. For the crucifixion is not bound by the constraints of our time. There is an eternal truth of Christ crucified, the daily suffering we inflict upon a God who loves us and who loves all his creation. Now it is not just belief or even gratitude, but a need to change, to live each day differently, carefully. This is the realm not just of faith but of hope and love.

Is it part of being human to inflict such pain? Is it part of being divine to bear the pain?

Is it part of God's great gift to us, that freedom to choose to reject him or be in relationship?

Can we learn to be in relationship with God?

We come lightly to the cross, can we learn to share the cost?

Forgive us Father, for we know not what we do.

Today you will be with me in paradise.

Paradise. Was that not the garden of Eden? A place of innocence, where God himself would take an evening stroll?

Oh, but Adam and Eve were expelled from that place. It was ST Augustine who coined the term the FALL.

According to him, the fall was purely the fault of Eve. Augustine taught that Satan, in the form of the serpent, tempted Eve because she was more gullible than Adam: he said "[Satan turned to] the inferior of the human pair ... supposing that the man would not be so easily gullible, and could not be trapped by a false move on his own part, but only if he yielded to another's mistake."

Is this famous passage really all about sin. The devil entered the snake, the snake seduced Eve because she was so easily tempted, and Adam was led astray by this evil woman Eve.

Jews would not share this view. And one can be reasonably confident that the writers of this passage did not intend it to be interpreted in this way either.

God gave Adam a command. You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

It would have been simpler if there had been no dangerous prohibited tree. But that is not how life is. The setting of a boundary implies the freedom to overstep the mark, to do what is forbidden. Adam and Eve are being given that freedom, a freedom that can only come with trust. Without trust and freedom there can be no real relationship. So in giving the prohibition, God is demonstrating his trust in allowing mankind to make free choices, choices whose consequences show most clearly in relationship.

But there is a betrayal of trust. How often this happens in the bible. Israel worships other Gods, Judas betrays Jesus, and in our own personal life, trust is often betrayed. We can't blame it all on the snake. The serpent was not Satan. Christianity and Judaism are not dualistic faiths. No, the snake was one of God's creatures. God has created the means by which temptation occurs. In other words, it is a necessary part of being human, of who we are, of our freedom to choose. God gave this

to us as a part of his creation. The serpent has something to offer Adam and Eve – knowledge. Humankind just cannot resist knowledge, it is a part of our condition to search after knowledge.

But this can lead to our downfall if it leads us away from God, if we want to play God.

In the story Eve was led astray by the serpent and Adam was didn't ask questions, he was an accomplice, allowing Eve to make the decision for him. How subtle and true is this teaching. Temptation can be full frontal, or very subtle, and whether we make the decision ourselves or just go along for the ride when someone else has made the decision, the result is the same.

But the outcome of all this is a new kind of knowledge – shame. Adam and Eve now know that they have done something wrong. They learn the power of the conscience and the consequences of turning away from God's prohibitions. It is not that knowledge is wrong, but if by having it we think we can do without God that we put everything at risk – and by everything, it means our relationships, with each other, with the natural world, and with God.

God loves us so much that he gives us freedom, freedom to betray his trust in us - a freedom that reached its full expression when he sent Jesus into the world, a world that rejected him, humiliated and crucified him. The story of Adam and Eve is not about the sinfulness of women, or about the devil or even how evil mankind is, it is a story about trust and relationship.

When we read the story in this way, it is clear that God wants all of us to be with him in Paradise. He reaches out a hand to us, wilful and obstinate though we are, and if we should ever turn to him, if ever we recognise his absolute love for us, if ever our eyes are opened to what he does for us, then he will lift us up into his presence, into that eternity of love that we call paradise.

Today you will be with me in paradise.

A mother looking down at her sleeping child, listening to the soft regular breathing, cannot help but feel love. That same mother may rage at her teenage son who answers back and refuses to get out of bed. Motherhood, and indeed fatherhood, makes emotions run high. But nothing can prepare a parent for watching their child suffer, feeling helpless in the face of their child's pain. Grief, rage against the circumstances, inadequacy, guilt at the inability to prevent the pain, all these surge forward, until there is just a white noise of suffering.

Mary must have felt all that and more. She must also have been full of unspoken 'if only's'. If only he had not provoked the authorities. If only he had not gone back to Jerusalem. If only he had refrained from stirring up the crowds. If only he had not brought this upon himself.

At the very moment when her love should have supported him, in amongst the sorrow and pain there must have been some anger that he had been so reckless, so headstrong, so unrealistic. How could he waste his life so?

For she, like us, would measure life in years. A long life, fading gently into old age, is the hope and expectation. A life cut short, dying in the prime of adulthood, or worse, in childhood, is viewed in terms of the loss of potential. We feel cheated as our time has been taken away.

Yet to God, all time is held within eternity, and all ages are one to him. Each moment can be stretched to form part of the fabric of heaven. Who we are, the love we share, all these are not measured by the units of time.

Jesus, the man dying in pain, understands our bondage to time even though Jesus, Son of God, knows that death brings freedom from those ties. He sees how his friends cannot bear to look at him, how they put up barriers to distance themselves from his pain, how they cannot even bear each other's distress and so hold their chill bundle of anguish to themselves, each one cocooned in their own grief, a grief tinged with shame and guilt. The communion of friendship and discipleship that had united them on the long treks, the loud supper parties, the wonderful discussions, now all fractured, in danger of disappearing for ever.

And from the cross, bloody, racked with pain, parched with thirst, Jesus speaks. Woman, behold your son – gesturing to John, his trusted companion throughout his ministry. And to John – behold, your mother. He gives the two people he loves care of each other, breaking open their cocoon of private grief, enabling them to turn, to touch, to hold, to comfort.

This strange new communion, a Christ-given relationship, gives them strength, strength now to look on Jesus, to let go of the anger, the shame, the if only's, and share their grief.

For grief is based on love and cannot and should not be denied. And this pure love, expressed as grief, unadulterated by all those other negative feelings, begins to work on the other disciples, healing the rifts, preventing the recriminations that would otherwise follow, bringing not relief from sorrow, but cleansing the sorrow so that it will heal well.

No life is ever wasted. Even when a two year old dies in its parents' arms, and their sorrow is overwhelming, that life has been as valuable and fulfilling and important as one that lasted a 100 years. For any life that brings love, any life that creates communion, has fulfilled its purpose. And that love, that sense of communion is not limited by time, not bound by our relentless plodding forward, it is freed, it is eternal, uniting us with Christ in that greater communion.

But if grief isolates us, prevents us from sharing another's pain, we will see none of this, for then our love is lost in our own sense of loss, in our own pain. Everything points back to ourselves. Only when we look outwards, to embrace each other's pain, will we find that God's love flows between us and through us and from us.

It is in losing ourselves that we find love. It is in finding love that we find God. It is in finding God that we lose our fear of time and our obsession with ourselves.

And so today we come to the cross. The cross of torture and pain, stained with blood, smelly with the deaths of countless men. And we must look, and see the pain, see it and share it, be filled with love that frees us from all guilt and fear and links us to the eternal love of God.

And when we turn away to go about our daily business, that love must remain. It must help us to look and see the pain of others, see it and share it, so that we can help them be filled with love, help them be freed from all that binds them, and help them be linked to the eternal love of God.

The words of Christ free us to enter that great communion.

Woman behold your son.

Being a parent brings many surprises, but for me the strangest of them has been the way in which my children now worry about me if I am out late. I will get a text message,

When are you coming home? They are having to learn that their parents, stolid, dependable, the ones who set the rules, who have always been there when they got home, who put them to bed if they had too much to drink, who bailed them out when they had spent all their money, these same stolid citizens are free spirits, and have lives of their own. It is the gift we give to our children – we set them free and then they have to learn that we too are free.

As we grow up in spiritual maturity, we gradually have to learn this about God. He who has always been there for us, nurtured us, taught us, waited patiently for us, is free. He has other things to attend to apart from us. It is his greatest gift to us, he sets us free.

The closer we are to God, the harder that freedom can be. The prophets were those who were so very close to God, hearing his word, having his presence in their lives. Yet their lives were not made easy by this, it didn't bring them comfort or joy.

Jeremiah even God of deceiving him:

You have duped me, Lord
and I have been your dupe;
you have out-witted me and prevailed.
All the day long I have been made a laughing stock;
everyone ridicules me. (Jeremiah 20.7 REB)

Job railed at God for the injustice of his situation, but received only the answer,

I am God, creator of all that is, who are you to question me?

Can we not depend upon God? If we can't, we are tempted to say, what then is the point?

We would like our faith to be certain, to think of God as a rock, our fortress, unchanging, unmoveable, dependable. And it is a terrible shock when we find out that God can be many other things, things that seem far more dangerous, fickle even.

Oh yes, he is described as a rock in the psalms, but also as an eagle, as a mother hen, more metaphors than we can count.

For in Genesis and Exodus he changes his mind. He repents even of his actions. He could abolish and rebuild. He had favourites: God had said of the sons of Isaac, before they were born, Jacob I loved and Esau I hated; that was his choice and no one could appeal against it.

God is not answerable to anyone, he is freedom itself. But we would like to tame him, make him our own. We want him to be always there when we need him, at our beck and call.

But that is not how life is.

There are times when God is absent, when we experience the long dark night of the soul. Times when we have to cling on to our faith by sheer will power, for it seems to fly in the face of all the evidence, until we remember those other times, times when God seemed so very close, when his touch brought warmth and comfort, when love and hope seemed everywhere.

Far from being firm, our faith can ebb and flow.

Some years ago I met an old man who was dying. He had been a missionary, a doctor, a poet, a musician, so many things. A man of deep faith, a life-long Christian. His wife, faithful Christian companion throughout his life, was now worried though, because he seemed to have lost his faith. He no longer said the daily office. He no longer seemed to call on God. He no longer wanted to talk about Christianity. He didn't even read the bible. She was so worried for his immortal soul. But in fact he had not lost his faith. He had lost his certainty – a different matter altogether. He could no longer find comfort in the familiar words, but he knew that God is, and although he no longer knew for certain what that meant, it was enough. He trusted at the last to what he could not know. That is real faith.

The last words of Jesus in Mark are: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus is given no answer in that book. Mark knew that faith would not be faith if he had been. To think you know is to destroy faith in the God who is free and to replace him with an alternative god. All we can do is make room for the God who gives us no answer; he is not answerable to us.

This freedom is God's uncomfortable gift to us.

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

The one who had offered the water of life, the one who had said 'whoever drinks the water I shall give will never again be thirsty', now cries out 'I thirst'.

The physical thirst will hurt. Watching the men tauntingly, ostentatiously, drinking from their water bottles, seeing his friends longing to help but unable to reach and too scared to try, feeling his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth, unable to swallow. That will hurt.

But worse still will be another thirst. Can it be that that well too feels dried up? The peace that comes from having God the Father as constant and close companion. The assurance and confidence and strength that had enabled him to walk so many miles and preach and teach in so many places. The knowledge that all will be well so long as we are faithful and follow where God wants us to go. No fear of storms for they can be stilled. No fear of illness or physical problems, they can be healed. Has all that dried up too?

For now, the body is dying, painfully, slowly, the storm clouds are gathering, the strength all but gone. The man, Jesus, thirsts. The Son of God, Jesus, thirsts. Thirsts for water, thirsts too for spiritual strength. It is not just God that has forsaken him, but humanity. He has been humiliated, tortured, crucified, deserted by mankind. Humankind has lost its humanity by turning its back on love, on his teaching, by refusing to see God at work all around them.

In his earthly ministry Jesus thirsted for justice, for compassion. His passion was to make men and women human, fully human as he was, made in the image of God, learning how to harness their capacity for feeling in a way that would bring peace and harmony. Learning that double standards were unacceptable, that hypocrisy was a sin. Learning that denial of self would bring about God's kingdom upon earth.

And those same people had turned away. They had rejected those kingdom values and in so doing denied their own humanity. Made themselves in their own image. Turned away from heaven.

And Jesus thirsts. Thirsts for what might have been. Thirsts for the kingdom that might have come, for the will of God that might have been done, for the daily bread that might have been given to all, for the sins that could have been wiped clean. He thirsts for the community that might have been created. For now he is totally alone. Forsaken by God, forsaken by humankind. Thirsting for water,

and for the water of life, for communion with God and God's people. Exiled, outcast. No-one can reach to quench this thirst, no stick with a sponge soaked in vinegar can come close to quenching it.

Here, God in Christ enters into the darkest abyss of the human soul. For this is how someone feels when they are in the deepest parts of depression. Deserted. No-one can reach to provide comfort. In that desolation there may well be people around who love us, who long to help, who would give up all they have to help, but even they cannot breach the barriers. Nothing they say or do can quench the thirst for communion, can cancel the feeling of total isolation and aloneness.

And yet God, through Christ, has experienced this. And when we stand there, feeling so completely alone in our misery, he is alongside, waiting, supporting, and above all, knowing the way back from that terrible place and able to lead us to new life.

For humankind is born for communion, for relationship. We are made in the image of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in relationship. We need to be in relationship with God, we need to be in relationship with each other. When any aspect of those relationships become fractured, we thirst, we cry out, we are in pain.

But we can be healed. For in his thirst, in his parched agony, in his separation and aloneness, Jesus once more opens up that well of living water.

When we come to the cross for healing, we enter into relationship, become part of that great communion, communion with each other, with Christ.

And there at the cross-shaped well, we can quench our thirst, and in so doing, we quench Christ's thirst too, so that he may be able to cease crying out:

I thirst.

The book of Genesis describes God gently moulding the earth to make Adam, breathing life into this figure. Lovingly setting humanity free, trusting that humanity will know and understand the limits of its power.

Humanity is a slow learner. Time and time again, it has to be drawn back by the prophets as its rulers oppress the weak, as the custodians of faith build for themselves power and wealth. And so throughout all the books of the Old Testament it seems a repeated cycle of faith, trust and betrayal is played and replayed.

Until that day when the final card is played, and God sends Jesus to be born as human child, born in a country ruled by occupying forces, where murder, even of children, was not uncommon.

The risk.

But that was where Jesus was born. It was to a place without much hope that hope came.

He came to show the way, the way to God's kingdom. To show us a world governed with justice, peace and love, and this dream has been left in our care. We dream of a world where children are not taken into slavery to make our shoes, of a world where no-one goes hungry while others throw out food, a world where all people and all life is respected. But this dream is as vulnerable as a new-born baby, giving a thin demanding cry in its total dependency upon our care.

Yet Jesus cries out 'it is finished'.

For he has brought us to a place where dreams can become reality. The intense vulnerability of a man dying in agony on a cross has been transcended. There is nothing more that can increase the pain. He has endured all, both physical and mental, both worldly and spiritual. He has come the full circle and as a result, this fragile dream of a new kingdom, a new way of living, a new heaven and a new earth has the means to become reality. It is as though a seed has been planted that can never be destroyed. Jesus is that seed.

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground.....

Once more God takes us to the Garden. Once more he trusts us with his creation. Once more he shows us the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Once more he breathes new life into us. we are indeed the followers of a new Adam.

And we look around at this new Eden and it is no paradise. We see the wars, we see the exploitation of the weak, we see starvation and poverty, we see the zealots so certain that they are right, we see Christians focussing all their time on legal issues - who is allowed to do what and to whom - we see this mess and are tempted to throw up our hands in horror.

But in this Garden is the seed that has been planted and we have been trusted with its care, to water it with the water of life, to nurture with the love of Christ, to forgive and create communion. Such a small and fragile seed it seems against this background of greed and corruption and quest for power. But the seed will never lose its potential to grow.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.....

We have been given all we need, we have the pattern of Christ, we have the help of the Spirit, we have the grace and forgiveness of God. No-one need feel forsaken, no one need thirst, no-one is beyond forgiveness, all are related, one family, all can be in paradise.

Despite all that has been, and all that is, God trusts us once more.

God's redeeming work is done.

It is finished.