



THE SPIAN THEOLOGY:
STORIES AND PLAYS
ABOUT GOD

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PREFACE

These stories were used in worship services at Eastwood Uniting Church over many years. I am a great believer in storytelling and I believe that many deep ideas, in both mathematics and theology, can be best communicated in story. Of course Jesus knew this and His numerous parables convey his message in a much more direct way than in straight teaching.

For many years the Eastwood Uniting Church ran an annual story-telling weekend, which featured many professional and semi-professional storytellers and attracted many participants. Events ranged from workshops, concerts to storytelling events that invited participants to tell their own stories.

The stories here are roughly ordered in their level of sophistication. The early ones would suit quite young children while the latter ones are quite deep and would probably only appeal to adults.

Mostly, when I conducted a service as a lay preacher I both told a story and preached a sermon. The typical response afterwards was people telling me how much they loved the story, with little mention of the sermon!

The dialogues are short plays, mostly with two characters, in a variety of locations where people might be sitting, waiting for something. Sometimes they know each other and sometimes they are strangers. As they chat they hit upon some topic about religion and faith, and they generally have quite different views.

These were developed to be performed as part of the worship in the Eastwood Uniting Church in Sydney, in place of the sermon. They were written by Christopher Cooper and the minister, Nicholas Fried and mostly performed by the two of us. Please note that the views expressed by our characters do not necessarily reflect our own views. But these little sketches explore questions about our faith. The answers need to be supplied by the reader, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

THE CRANE DRIVER

Jennifer's father was a crane driver and one day she had the chance to see her father at his work. Now she knew that he was a crane driver but she'd always pictured a small crane.

The only crane she'd ever seen was the one on the back of the tow-truck when their car had broken down and somehow she imagined her father standing beside the little crane, pulling the levers.

But ... Mr McPherson, her father, worked on the docks down near Pyrmont. And he operated one of those giant cranes that are used to unload big ships.

Well one day her mother took Jenny to see the crane that her father operated. They stood on the wharf with the noise of whistles and shouting and machines whirring.

"There's Daddy up there," said mother pointing up to the sky. Far above, among all the iron beams, was a little cabin (well it seemed tiny to them) and an arm waving down at them.

Jenny gasped as she saw her father and his crane, pick up huge boxes, trucks and even a diesel engine, from out of the ship's hold and place them on the wharf.

There were men running around in all directions, waving their arms and blowing whistles, connecting and disconnecting huge steel cables and heavy chains. But the most important person was her father, the crane driver.

"Daddy's the king of the whole wharf," she said proudly.

It was funny to think that the same person who passed the sugar that morning over breakfast was now in charge of passing a huge diesel locomotive from ship to shore.

Now it was against the rules for anyone except the driver to go up into the cabin of the crane, but when the loading and unloading was finished for the day, father thought he'd break the rules and take Jenny for a ride in the cab.

It was such a big crane she had to go up in a small lift to where her father was. The arm of the crane towered above them in the cab, and there was mother far below on the wharf, patiently waiting.

The cabin wasn't as small as it had seemed from the ground and it was full of dials and lights and levers. Father pressed a button and pulled a lever and the cab, and the whole crane above, started turning. Then another lever and Jenny could see the arm of the crane starting to lower.

Jenny's eyes were wide open. This was her father and he was so clever and important to be driving such a huge and complicated crane. Of course she had known him all her life but somehow that day she saw him in a new way. With his crane he was able to pick up huge pieces of machinery and dangle them in the air just as easily as he would pick her up and dangle her on his knee.

He was not just her dear father who lived with her in the little brick house in Miller Street. He was Mr McPherson, the crane driver, who from his cab high above the wharf, controlled everything.

Many years ago some men went up into the mountains with somebody they had known very well for some time. They had had meals with him, and had travelled with him and had worked with him.

Though they knew that he was somehow special, they just called him by his first name, and most of the time they just thought of him as just a good friend that they worked for. But when they got to the top of this mountain, something strange happened which made them realise that he was not just Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter's son. He was also Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God.

He appeared to them in dazzling white and there were bright lights shining all around them which almost blinded them, and the prophets Elijah and Moses appeared there also. This was the great event we call the transfiguration.

The disciples wanted to stay there forever, it was so wonderful, just as Jenny didn't want to go back down from the crane, she was having so much fun. But Jesus led the disciples back down to continue their work of teaching and healing. He knew it was not good for them to stay up there. They had to come down.

But they never forgot that experience on the mountain top and from then on thought about Jesus in a much more special way, just as Jenny also never forgot her experience up in the crane and from that day she thought of her father in a more special way.

It's a magical thing that Jesus, who is your own very special friend, is also the most important person who has ever lived – far more important than Walt Disney or Kevin Rudd or Barack Obama or Albert Einstein.

Jesus is the Son of the God of the whole universe and yet he is also your own special friend who knows more about you and cares more for you than you do yourself.

Now as a child you might feel that you don't know as much about Jesus as an adult does. There are probably many of parts of the bible you don't understand. You probably couldn't tell me what justification by faith means. You might not be able to recite the Apostle's Creed, and even if you could you might not be able to understand all of it.

Yet, who do you think knew more about what sort of person Mr McPherson was – Jennifer, or one of the wharfies who worked with him? No doubt about it, Jennifer did. She wouldn't have known the first thing about driving a crane or unloading ships. But he was her father and she knew him really well.

Well, its just the same about Jesus. As a child you might still have a lot to learn about the bible. You mightn't know as much about what Jesus did when He was on earth, as grown ups. But you can know Him, as a friend, in your heart, just as well as your parents, or your Sunday School teacher or a minister.

LIVING WATER

Brenda was a little girl from Bunyip Crossing who had never seen the surf. For all eight years of her little life she had lived in the dusty west until now she had the chance of a holiday by the sea.

She sat beside the roar of the waves on the beach, marveling at all that power and energy as wave after wave came crashing in sending foam and spray in all directions.

So much power! How she wished she had a little of it for herself – for she was a sickly little girl who always felt weak and tired and she could only walk with the help of a walking stick. She would give anything to join the other surfers playing among the breakers, but for her it would have been too dangerous.

Instead, she had made it her project to collect specimens of sand. She had managed to find eight different colours – eight shades of brown and yellow, grey and orange and even a little pink.

Some she collected by the beach, others she could only find beside the little creek that runs into the lagoon. It was hard work as she hobbled around but it gave her a great deal of pleasure. She would pour small amounts of the sands, layer upon layer, into little bottles as gifts for her family. But if she wasn't always so tired she would have been down there running and splashing with all the other children.

When she went back home she would be taking her little bottles of sand to remind her of the beach. But wouldn't it be nice if she could take back some of the surf as well! She had asked her older brother to take a plastic bottle out to where the waves were breaking to collect the foaming, swirling water, but of course when he got it back it was just like any other water, only dirtier. The foam and froth and bubbles had disappeared. The life, the energy of the surf had gone. It was just a bottle of dead surf! If only there was some way of bringing it back to life.

The day before she was due to go home she watched Gerry, one of the life-savers walking back to the clubhouse for his lunch. Although he was much older and much more active than she was, he had become one of her special friends. She slowly made her way over to him. She talked with him as he ate his sandwiches. When he had finished he reached into his canvas bag and pulled out a jar of fine white sand – at least that's what it looked like to Brenda. Where had he got such pure white sand?

Then he took out a glass and filled it with water from the tap near the door. Taking a plastic spoon from his bag he heaped it with the white sand and plunged it into the water, stirring vigorously.

The most amazing thing happened! The water became alive! It bubbled and sparkled and frothed and spluttered. Now to you and I there is no magic in a glass of fruit saline. Mix a spoonful in water and it bubbles up to make a refreshing drink. But Brenda had never seen fruit saline – never even heard of it. The general store in Bunyip Crossing had never stocked it, and whenever the general store in a small country town doesn't stock something, why it doesn't exist at all. Brenda believed that the glass contained a small portion of surf.

Her eyes opened even wider when Gerry raised the glass to his lips and drank it down in one gulp. In an instant she knew what she wanted. If only she could take some of that special sand back to Bunyip Crossing she could have the surf whenever she wanted.

It really was quite amazing – what was dead became alive. But what was even more amazing was that you could drink this surf. Gerry played along with her mistake and said, “how about a glass of waves and breakers for you?” He made a second glass of the stuff for her and she drank it. It was good even if some of the bubbles went up your nose. She felt much more alive and a lot less tired. Some of the energy of the surf had gone inside of her.

Of course now that Brenda is a little older she knows that it's only fruit saline. But she still enjoys that refreshing bubbly drink because it reminds her that what seems dead can become alive, just as Jesus died and became alive again. It also reminded her that Jesus lives within her, refreshing her and giving her energy and life. And she also remembered the story in the Bible where Jesus met the woman at the well.

“If you drink the water from this well, you'll get thirsty again,” he said. “But if you drink the water that I can give you, you will never be thirsty again. The living water that I can give you is like a fountain inside of you, bubbling and sparkling over into eternal life.”

“ME” DUST

It all happened one night. Everybody in the town went to bed as usual but when they woke up next morning ... well! During the night there had been a dust storm and the next morning the dust was everywhere.

Now this wasn't ordinary dust that makes you go “achoo! achoo! achoo!”. This was “me” dust which makes you go “me! me! me!”

It turns ordinary generous people into selfish, grasping, demanding people who are out to get what they want and watch out anyone who stands in their way.

It's amazing what just a little of this special dust can do when it blows up somebody's nose. There's always some of it around but on *this* night large amounts of ‘me’ dust blew in from the east.

The next morning at breakfast tables all over town the same thing happened. Children, and even some adults, were squabbling over the breakfast cereals!

“I got it first” ... “No I did” ... “There's just enough here for me so get lost.”

In many families the squabbling ended up on the floor and weeks later they were still cleaning up rice bubbles and corn flakes.

I won't say what happened on the school bus that morning – you'd be too shocked!

At school they were going to have a film. It wasn't one of those boring educational films. It was in fact a very funny comedy that was only being shown because one of the teachers had a small part in it and the children had been looking forward to it for weeks.

Now it was a special honour on these occasions to be the one chosen to climb up on the window ledges and pull down the long blinds to make the room dark enough.

But on this day when the teacher asked who would like to do it there was a chorus of “me! me! me!” all over the room and a great wave of children surged towards the windows, pushing, shrieking, climbing over each other. Dozens of grasping hands reached for the blinds and yes ... the blinds were pulled down. Right on top of them all! For a moment it looked like the ocean – the blinds bobbed up and down like waves as the children scrambled from underneath.

It was clear there would be no films *that* day. Lunch was a disaster but because the children were outside there was not too much broken.

The afternoon was sport and the school rugby team was expected to beat the visiting team from the next town. But the visitors had never played a game like the one they played that day. They won 66-3. Every time the home team got hold of the ball they were jumped on by all their team mates. Everyone in the home team wanted to be the one to score the try. They kicked and screamed and wrestled with each other desperately trying to get the ball.

All the visitors had to do was to keep at a distance and soon the ball would roll out from the heap of struggling bodies that was the home team. The home team didn't even notice that the ball they were fighting over was no longer there!

The visitors could take their time and stroll up to the try line and score. It was only when the whistle went the home team realised they no longer had possession.

Yet they didn't learn. It happened over and over again. Each of the home team was playing as an individual instead as part of a team. The boy who scored the only goal for the home team was elated. So what if his team was thrashed. *He* was the only one in his team to score.

The bus trip back to school was uneventful because the bus didn't turn up. The driver had decided that it was such a lovely afternoon he would go for a swim in the river.

Unfortunately the garbage men had got there first. They wanted to go to the races in the next town so to save time they dumped their load in the river rather than taking it back to the depot.

They didn't get to the races, though, because the bus didn't turn up. Everybody in the town that day acted thoroughly selfishly.

Dinner that night was a riot. In one family the father came home with an ice-cream for each of his family. But he'd chosen 6 different flavours and the squabbling about who should get what lasted so long that the ice-creams melted. The cat and the dog had a great time under the table licking up the mess. *They* were happy to share because they knew there was enough for both of them.

With much grumbling and bickering they all eventually went to bed. That night the wind changed and swept most of the "me" dust away, so the next morning there was only a little of it around. Everyone went back to being kind and unselfish most of the time but they'll never forget the day when the whole town put self before others.

In most places, there's always a bit of "me" dust around. You won't see it but you *can* see its effect on people. Whenever you come across somebody acting selfishly, thinking only of himself or herself, you will know there is some of it around.

And if you feel you're about to say or do something selfish and to sneeze “me! me! me!” just put your finger under your nose until the urge to be selfish goes away. Every time you do this you'll make the world a better place to live in.

THE GOLD-PLATED ICE-CREAM

Maria loved ice-cream. She lived in a part of London called West Hampstead. One day as she was walking past the tube railway station there she saw some people handing out free ice-creams. It was a new and very special ice-cream called the Gold-Plated Magnum and they were promoting them.

I don't know whether you've ever eaten a gold-plated ice-cream before? Maria certainly hadn't. Of course they weren't really gold-plated. They were large golden-coloured ice-creams that sparkled and gleamed as if they were covered in gold.

Maria took one and as she walked away she started to lick it. It tasted wonderful! She was going to enjoy it so much but ... what about when it was all gone? She couldn't go back to ask for another free one and she'd forgotten the name.

What she would do was to find a shop that sold them and buy a second one. She would walk into a shop that sold ice-creams and show them this one and ask if they had one like it.

That meant of course that she couldn't eat this one just yet. By the time she walked into the first shop, the gold-plated ice-cream was getting a little soft and some of it was sliding down the cone and dripping on the floor.

“No we don't have any ice-creams that look like that”, said the shop-keeper rather crossly, “and watch where you're dripping that one!”

By the time she found another shop that sold ice-cream, hers was half-melted. Maria put her handkerchief around the cone before she went into the shop so that it wouldn't drip onto the linoleum.

“Do you sell an ice-cream that looks like this?”

“Sorry miss. But hadn't you better be eating that one before it all melts away?”

But Maria knew that once she had eaten it she'd have nothing to show the next shop-man. By the time she eventually reached the third shop the bottom of the cone had become so soggy that it fell off and the golden ice-cream had dripped out so that all that was left was an empty, and rather soggy ice-cream cone with a hole in the bottom.

“Do you have an ice-cream that looks like this?”, she asked.

The shop-man looked at her and looked at the soggy cone, somewhat puzzled. Then he took a cone from under the counter, bit off the end of it and dunked it in the water in the washing-up bowl.

“There you are miss, that will be twenty pence.”

Perhaps Maria was too greedy. Instead of enjoying her first ice-cream, she was already worrying about where to get a second one.

God wants us to work hard and study hard for our future. But we must also enjoy the free gifts that he has given us now. Some people, like Maria, are so worried about enjoying themselves in the future that they aren't grateful for God's free gifts in the present – gifts such as youth, and health, and people who love you, and enough to eat, and sunshine.

There was once a greedy man who worked very hard all his life just so that he could be rich when he was old. Being rich he would enjoy himself, travel the world, have lots of girl- friends, buy a big yacht.

He worked ten-hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. He never took holidays. What kept him going was the dream of being rich in his retirement.

Well you can guess what happened. He worked so hard that near to the time that he would have retired, he got sick. He didn't die, yet, but he had to spend the rest of his days in bed. So he wasn't able to travel, was all alone and although he still bought a yacht, he wasn't able to enjoy it.

So as you grow up, work hard to get the things you want. But remember, don't forget that there are many good things that God gives us for nothing. Don't be so busy that you don't notice them.

Jesus said something about the lilies of the fields. But if he'd lived in Australia he might have said it a little differently.

Consider the wild-flowers that grow in the bush, they do no work, unlike the ants, and they don't spin webs like the spiders. But I tell you that not even Priscilla, the Queen of the Desert, was dressed as beautifully as they are.

Work hard but don't forget God's free gifts.

THE WORLD

Once there was a young girl called Savita, who came to Australia from India and she started going to Cheltenham Girls High. She became friends with an Australian girl called Sasha, and she asked her if she could join her at lunchtime.

“I’ll have to ask my clique if you can join us,” said Sasha.

“What’s a clikka?” asked Savita.

“It’s sort of a club. If you want to sit with us at lunch you have to belong to the clique. And if someone wants to join us we have to have a vote. I’ll let you know after school what they say.”

After school Savita spoke to Sasha.

“Sorry,” said Sasha. They said that we were all born in Australia and you were born somewhere else, so you’re different to us and you can’t join with us.”

Savita was very sad, and for the next few days she sat all by herself at the far end of the playground, eating her curry and Naan bread.

Then one day, at lunchtime, Sasha came up to her.

“I’ve just found out that I was born in America and came to Australia when I was very young.”

“So they kicked you out of the clique when they found out?” asked Savita.

“No, they said America was OK to be born in, but I told them that I’d rather not stay in the group.”

“We can form our own clique,” said Savita.

“And we won’t let anyone join us who was born in Australia” said Sasha.

“No,” said Savita, “it doesn’t matter where you were born.”

So they added extra members to their little group, over the next couple of weeks. A few were from Australia, Amimik was born in Greenland, and Cleopatra was born in Egypt.

“What was it like when you were a little girl in India,” June asked Savita.

“We lived near an elephant sanctuary and I used to ride an elephant bare back. An elephant’s hairs can be very prickly on your bare legs I can tell you!”

“What about you?” Sasha asked Amimik.

“Well we lived in a blue wooden house, but my Dad sometimes took my brother and me out onto the ice and taught us how to cut blocks of ice to make an igloo, in case we were out on the ice when a blizzard blows up.”

“We had nothing like that in Giza,” said Cleo, “but from the widow of the building where we lived you could look out onto the pyramids. I used to go there amongst all the tourists and sold postcards and cheap jewellery – one dollar for you lady.” They all laughed

Jesus taught us to love our neighbour. And when asked by a Jew “who is my neighbour” he told a story about a good Samaritan, a man from another country – a country that the Jews thought poorly of. He taught us to accept not only people who are like us, but also people who are different to us. In fact he even taught us to love our enemies.

THE SILVER TRUMPET

I want to tell you a story about a little boy called Louis. James was eight, and on his eighth birthday his mother bought him a violin. It was not quite what he was hoping for.

“You’re going to have violin lessons, just like your sister,” his mother said.

However Louis didn’t like this idea at all. “But Mum, a violin’s a sissy instrument. Boys don’t play the violin. I want to be like Louis Armstrong.”

Now *I* don’t think that it’s a sissy instrument, and I’m sure that none of *you* think that it is. In fact many of the greatest violinists in the world are men. But you must remember that Louis was only eight, and his big sister, Jessica, played the violin. She would often invite her friends from the school orchestra to their house – all of them girls, of course, with their violins. And they played together for hours on end. It just so happened that all the violinists in the school orchestra were girls and Louis didn’t know a single boy who played the violin. So, for him, it was only a girl’s instrument.

“I want to play the trumpet. That’s a *real* instrument.”

“A trumpet is such a noisy instrument. Anyway, I’ve already paid Professor Huppert for a year’s lessons, so you’ll just have to go. We’ll see what you think about it after that.”

The months went by and Louis went to violin lessons – under sufferance. That means he grumbled every time he went. And he often forgot to practice, which annoyed his teacher. But it was fortunate in a way, because his squeaky playing got on his family’s nerves. Eventually his sister persuaded their mother to take him off the violin. So for his ninth birthday Louis got a bright, new, shiny, silver trumpet. He was over the moon with delight.

He loved his trumpet so much he even slept with it under his pillow. And although for the first few days he made the strangest of sounds – just like when a teenage boy’s voice breaks – after a week he was playing it really well.

He even took it with him to church, although he didn’t dare try to play it. And one day he was delighted that the Bible reading was all about silver trumpets.

The Lord said to Moses: Make two silver trumpets and use them to call everyone together for a meeting.

And the choir that day even sang Psalm 150. When they sang the words “Praise God with the sound of the trumpets” the organ sounded just like a trumpet. It was all Louis could do to stop himself joining in.

Over the next few months Louis' playing improved dramatically. He also found out that there were many places in the Bible where it talks about trumpets. There's a verse where it says "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord." Among other things, God is the God of music and in church we can praise Him by singing songs.

Now do you know that there are some churches – only a few – where they think it's wrong to sing in church. How boring that must be! In some churches they even have people dancing to praise God.

Anyway, getting back to Louis. He joined the school orchestra and was really enjoying it. But I have to tell that one day he was hauled up in front of the headmaster for *stealing*. But it was all a big mistake. You see there was a concert at the end of the year and the school orchestra was taking a big part. Louis was one of the four trumpet players, and between you and me, he was the very best.

His mother was in the audience at the concert and she was puzzled by the fact that Louis was playing a *brass* trumpet, not his own silver trumpet. Then she noticed that one of the other trumpeters had a silver trumpet, but he had a black look on his face – he didn't look at all happy.

After the concert the headmaster took Louis and his mother aside and accused Louis of stealing the brass trumpet.

"That trumpet you have in your hand belongs to Andrew Jones," said Mr Gilbert.

"Oh, yes," said Louis, "I have to give it back to him."

"But *why* did you take it?" asked his mother. Your silver trumpet is a special one and it cost me a lot more than that brass one."

"It's what the minister said in church last Sunday. I was just doing what he said."

The headmaster couldn't believe his ears. "I don't believe that your minister would tell you to steal a trumpet," said Mr Gilbert. "You're not just a thief but you're telling lies as well."

"I wasn't *stealing* it – I was just *borrowing* it."

"But you didn't get Andrew's permission, so that's stealing. You can't get out of it by stretching the meaning of words. Tell me, exactly what did the minister say?"

"He said ... you shouldn't blow your own trumpet."

Now I don't know if you've heard someone talking about people 'blowing their own trumpet'. It's a saying that means someone who is boasting. You know, the boy who goes on about all the silver cups he's won in athletics, or the girl who keeps telling everyone that she got an iPad for her birthday, *and* a pony and how rich her father is.

The minister was preaching about humility. It doesn't mean thinking that you're nothing – the lowest of the low. It means thinking that other people are just as important as you are, in God's eyes. The minister said "don't blow your own trumpet" but he had no idea that Louis would think that this meant he had to borrow someone else's for the concert!

The problem was solved when Louis's mother explained what it meant to blow your own trumpet, and the trumpets were swapped back. Andrew Jones was very good about it and even laughed when he heard what Louis had thought.

So if I tell you not to blow your own trumpet, and you're a trumpeter, I don't mean that you should play someone else's trumpet, especially without their permission. What I *do* mean that you shouldn't go around telling everyone else how great you are – or believing that you are so much better than others. It's possible that you might be better at some things than other people. God may have given you special gifts. But he loves everyone the same.

There's a verse in the Bible that says "blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth". This was part of a sermon that Jesus preached once, high up on a mountain top. Like a lot of things he said, you're not meant to take it literally. It doesn't mean that if you let everyone walk all over you, and tell everyone you're a loser, you'll become incredibly rich. What it *does* mean is that if you don't blow your own trumpet, and instead treat everyone as someone who's just as important you, you'll get the gifts of God's kingdom, and become happier within yourself.

Music is an important part of our worship. Whether it's our hymns, or a great piece of music with an orchestra and organ, music can help us get a glimpse of God.

There's a legend – nobody can tell if it was true or not – that many hundreds of years ago there lived a young girl, called Cecilia, who was forced by her parents to marry someone she didn't want to marry. At her wedding she saw an angel who beckoned her to stand apart from her husband and to sing her heart out to the glory of God. She later became a Christian martyr. She then became the patron saint of musicians.

Many pieces of music have been written in her honour. Many special concerts and musical festivals are held, in her honour. Well, that's not quite true. The honour is really God's and these concerts and festivals remind us of the fact that God is the God of music and that through music we can give him praise.

Louis grew up and played in a symphony orchestra. He's so famous that you would understand if he had a swelled head. I don't mean that his head would actually be large –

that's just what people say about someone who goes about thinking that they are much better than others. Isn't the English language strange with some of the things we say? No, Louis knew that he had been given a special gift, but he also knew that this meant he had a special responsibility. It didn't mean that God loved him any more than his the mentally disabled cousin. Like a parent, God loves all his children just the same.

If you play a musical instrument remember to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord". And if you don't, you can at least join in the singing with enthusiasm, and praise God through the hymns. And if you feel like dancing in praise of God you have His blessing to do so.

THE MILLER BY THE SEA

Once upon a time there lived a miller who lived in a very old-fashioned country where they still use windmills to grind corn to make flour.

Now miller Turnwheel, for that was his name, used to live high in the mountains by a fast-flowing stream. The water ran down with considerable force, turning his wheel which turned his machinery which turned his huge grinding wheel which ground his corn till it became smooth, fluffy, fine flour.

The mill was so high in the mountains that it was very cold, and icy winds would blow down from the snowy peaks above and whistle around the yard that surrounded the mill and the mill house.

Mrs Turnwheel, the miller's wife, suffered greatly from the cold. She was always sniffing and the damp winds did terrible things to her arthritis.

So one day, at the suggestion of Mr Wheeze the doctor, the miller decided to dismantle his mill and move it down-stream near to the place where the river widens out into the sea. The weather would be much milder there, he thought, and kinder to Mrs Turnwheel's arthritis. Besides, there was a little town close by, which he thought might be nice for Mrs Turnwheel.

So he moved his mill close to the sea. But it wasn't until he rebuilt the mill and was testing it that he discovered something very curious about the flow of the water. During some parts of the day the water flowed downstream, as it should, quite quickly and the wheel turned strongly and ground his corn.

But then the flow would stop and then start up again in the opposite direction – the water flowed upstream! And because his machinery was not designed to go backwards, he had to shut down the mill at these times.

Then several hours later, the water would begin to surge down-stream again and once again he was able to grind his corn.

This starting and stopping was very inconvenient. It meant that he was only able to grind his corn half the time. It wouldn't have mattered if the idle hours were always at night, but they weren't. Often he would have to sleep through the day and get up in the middle of the night to grind. He was at the mercy of the flow of the water.

Now you can probably guess what caused the river to constantly change its mind as to which direction it was to flow. This surge of water, in at some times, out at others, was

because the water was being driven by a great engine in outer space – the one we call the moon. Yes, this was the tide!

You probably don't think of the moon as an engine. It looks so peaceful and beautiful and shiny. Engines are usually noisy and ugly and dirty. But the moon, as it goes round the earth, is a mighty engine that pulls the waters of the earth with its long gravitational arms. The moon is the cause of that great miracle we call the tides.

But the miller was a simple man, who had lived his whole life in the mountains, and he knew nothing of tides. To him this was just a tiresome problem which he had to solve.

First he asked the town policeman, Constable Stopp.

“Constable Stopp,” he said, “you direct the traffic in the centre of town on market day. Are you able to stop the waters coming back the wrong way in the river?”

“Well, no,” said Constable Stopp. “It's true that I can control the traffic on market day but that's because if any driver refuses to do what I say I can simply lock him up in the town jail. But I'm not sure I could lock up all that water! I'd like to help you but I can't. Why don't you go to see Mr Plugg, the plumber. It seems to me that it's a plumbing problem and he might be able to suggest something.

So the miller went off to see Mr Plugg.

“Mr Plugg,” he said, “I know that you are very clever with water and Constable Stopp told me that once when the water started gurgling back up through the plughole of his bath, you told him it was a blocked drain and you fixed it. Now I think there must be some sort of blockage in the river. Could you fix it?”

“I'm sorry,” said Mr Plugg. “It's true that I can fix a blocked drain. But to do that I replaced the blocked part of the drain with a new piece of pipe and I haven't got a pipe as big as the river. So I can't see how I can help. Perhaps you could ask Sir Oswald Canute who lives in that big house on top of that hill.”

So the miller went up to the fine old house and asked Sir Oswald Canute if he could make the waters behave themselves.

“Oh yes,” he said, “I've heard that story about my ancestor King Canute. He had his throne carried down to the water's edge as the tide was coming in and he held up his hands and commanded the waters to come no closer. But it's recorded that he got very, very wet. So there's no family secret or special power I have over the tides.”

The miller could think of nobody else he could ask so he just had to accept that he could work only when the tide was going out, even if that happened to be the middle of the

night. And he had to rest when the tide was coming in, even if that was in the middle of the day.

The miller took it for granted that the river should always flow in the same direction because that's all he'd known in the mountains.

The tide flowing out is like giving and the tide flowing in is like receiving. And both are very important. If nobody gives we could never receive and if nobody receives we could never give.

Now mothers tend to do a lot of giving, but Mother's Day is a day when we turn the tide around – when we think of what we can give back.

I'm not thinking of the steam irons and slippers that we see in all the advertising at this time of the year. I'm not even thinking of the way some of us will say, "put your feet up Mum, we're doing the cooking today."

A gift far more valuable than these is the gift of appreciation and thankfulness.

Some mothers are very hard to buy gifts for but acknowledgments of what they've done for us is something no mother ever gets enough of.

Appreciation and thankfulness is the flowing back of the tide – a sign that we're not taking someone for granted.

That someone need not be our mother. This truth is bigger than Mother's Day. Many who aren't mothers or fathers have given of themselves in serving others and continue to do so.

But wider even than the truth that God needs our gift of thankfulness and acknowledgment to complete the giving cycle.

It's funny to think of God wanting gifts from us. Yet there it is. He wants our gift of adoration and praise.

Not because he needs to be told how wonderful he is. The pleasure a mother gets from being told "Gee Mum, that was a nice meal" isn't because she needs to be told how good she is. It's simply the pleasure of knowing that the meal has been appreciated – the satisfaction of having the giving cycle completed.

God wants our adoration and praise in the same way. He doesn't have a swelled head that needs to be told how wonderful He is. But He does yearn – more than any mother – for us to appreciate the gifts that he showers upon us.

STELLA, HALLEY'S COMET

Stella was a star who wanted to be part of a constellation. But none of the constellations wanted anything to do with her. You're too faint they said, and besides you're too restless – you can't sit still long enough. We don't want our constellations to be blurred.

For it was true that Stella was always on the move and she regularly disappeared for long periods of time.

One day, when she was near the constellation of Orion, she asked some of the other stars whether she could be a part of Orion's Belt.

"I could be the buckle on the Belt of Orion," she said.

"A fine buckle you'd make," they said, "you'd go wandering off into space and Orion's pants would fall down!"

And they all chuckled to each other at the ridiculous idea of Stella being part of their constellation.

"Perhaps I could be the tail of the fish," said Stella to the stars in the constellation of Pisces the Fish. "I've got very long hair which could be the tail."

The stars of Pisces pulsed to each other and said, "Stella wants her hair to be the tail of Pisces the fish! can you imagine? Just look at the way she swims about in space – head first. Can you imagine a fish swimming tail first?"

For it was true. Whenever she travelled away from the sun she did so head first, with the filaments of her hair streaming out in front of her.

One day she spoke to the few stars that made up the smallest constellation in the sky – the Southern Cross. "You could surely do with another star in your constellation", she said. "My hair could point towards the centre of the cross."

"The trouble with you," they said, "is that you spend the whole day sitting in front of the sun, drying your hair. You'd never be able to point in the right direction."

Stella went around the other 85 constellations but without success. In fact most of them simply ignored her. They'd just look right through her as if she was invisible. She seemed fated to always be a lone star.

One day, an astronomer by the name of Ed, called out to her as he peered at her through his telescope.

"Hullo, why are you looking so sad?" he asked.

“I’m a lone star that nobody wants in their constellation,” she replied.

“But you're not a star,” said Ed. “Don't you know that you're a comet. That’s why you’re so restless. Comets always go walkabout for long periods of time.”

“Then my hair ...?” she asked.

“That’s just the tail that every comet has, streaming out in the solar wind. What’s your name my pretty little comet?”

“Stella. What’s yours?”

“Ed. Well Stella, I’d like to give you another name because Stella means star and you’re not a star. Would you mind if I called you after me?”

“Hm! Ed’s comet. I’m not sure that I particularly like the sound of that.”

No, no. I’d call you after my last name. How does Halley’s comet sound?”

So Halley’s comet she became. And what a difference it made to her. At last she belonged.

“I’m a comet you know,” she’d call out to Saturn and Jupiter as she swept past. “I’m Halley's comet.”

Of course the next time she returned to the vicinity of the earth 76 years later, Halley wasn’t there to greet her. But other astronomers were there, waiting for her to return.

No more would she be an unwanted piece of the solar system. She belonged! Oh she wasn’t the biggest, most important heavenly body, and when she was off on her long journeys to the distant parts of space most people forgot all about her. But when she was due to return to our skies there were astronomers waiting for her return. And the excitement spread until for a few weeks the whole world was caught up in comet fever.

They’d look up and say to each other. “Look up there, streaking across the sky. That's Halley's comet.”

Until she was discovered by Halley, Stella was lonely, desperately lonely. Lonely people are those who think they don't belong anywhere. They feel they could come and go without anybody noticing, without anyone caring.

I remember once seeing a musical called *Chicago*. One of the characters called himself Mr Cellophane. He said that wherever he went, people would just look straight through him as if he wasn’t there, as if he was quite invisible.

In fact when he signaled to the orchestra that he was ready to begin his big song they just ignored him. Eventually he had to sing it unaccompanied.

How many cellophane people do you know? How many people make you think of Glad Wrap. You'll have to look hard to see them.

What about at school? The boy or girl who always eats their lunch off by themselves. That new kid in the street that nobody knows and nobody wants to know. What about that old lady across the road. She hasn't got any family and the only friendship she gets all day is when people smile at her as they walk past.

These are the people who are just waiting to be discovered. Perhaps, like Halley, you can be the one to discover them. Get out your telescope and look around you.

THE ORANGE PIP

Hullo there. I'm a seed. You'll need to come a little closer if you want to see me because I'm not very big. I'm an orange seed, but my friends call me Pip. Sometimes they call out "hullo Pipsqueak" but I don't like that. I'm a seed not a squeak.

Anyway, I was born in this orchard here inside a big juicy orange. Oh, it was a cosy, moist world but eventually the time came for me to go out into the big, wide, world. Farmer Joe opened up the orange in which I lived and I spilled out with all my brothers and sisters into a big box.

So here I am with lots and lots of family – not just brothers and sisters but cousins of uncles of nephews of grandmothers. There must be thousands of us orange seeds in this box. I wonder what Farmer Joe intends to do with us. I've heard that some seeds are used for bread making. I should like to be made into a loaf of bread. That would make me feel really useful.

One of my cousins said that they don't use orange pips in bread. He may be right, but as he's only a seed he doesn't know much.

Oh, here comes Joe now. He's picked up the box and taken us out into the bright sunshine. I wonder where he's taking us. He's taking us out into the fields. Perhaps that's where the bakery is. But now he's put the box down onto the ground. I can't quite see what's going on.

One of my cousins has fallen out of the box so he can see what Joe is doing and he's calling it out to the rest of us.

Joe has a big steel thing with a wooden handle. It's flat at the end and he's sticking it into the ground and dirt is coming out. Oh, one of my cousins says it's a spade. What's that? He's digging in the dirt with his spade.

What's he doing now? He seems to be digging small deep holes. What on earth could they be for? Do you think he's forgotten all about us and is digging holes for fence-posts?

No, he's picked the box up and is carrying it over to the holes. Oh no, he's just picked me up and he's dropped me into one of these holes. Thud! I've hit the bottom of the hole. This can't be how you make bread. Oh no, he's covering up the hole with dirt. I can't see! I can't breathe! I think I'm going to die!

I can't tell whether it's night or day. I can't see anything – I can't hear anything. I must be dead.

Oh no, I feel all wet! I hope I haven't wet my pants. No, of course not silly. Seeds don't wear pants. No, the water's coming from above my head. Oh dear, I'm getting all wet. What a terrible thing is happening to me. I'm not just a dead seed – I'm a muddy dead seed.

I can't tell how long I've been dead but for some time I've felt rather strange. Is this what death is like? I feel as though I'm a lot bigger than I was. And I seem to be able to move my fingers. Silly me, seeds don't have fingers. But yet I seem to be able to move something that feels a bit like fingers.

Being dead is so strange. I don't like it one little bit. Now one of my fingers is getting rather warm. Oh no! I know what's happening. Farmer Joe has decided not to bury me after all. He's going to burn me up in a fire!

But wait. My finger is nice and warm but it's not getting any hotter. What can this mean? And now another finger feels warm. Oh my, what's happening to me?

Now it's not so completely black as it was. I seem to be able to see some faint light. Oh, now it's getting brighter and ... yes, I think I can make out a colour. It's sort of green. Wait. That green thing has started to get edges. It seems to have a shape. Yes, it's shaped like a leaf. It *is* a leaf – a leaf that's very close to me. Get away from me leaf!

Most curious. When ever wiggle my finger the leaf wiggles too. If I stop, the leaf stops. It's almost as if that leaf is part of me. But I'm only a pip. Orange pips don't have leaves. They don't have fingers either. Being dead is more strange than I'd ever imagined. It's as if I'm getting a whole new body. Is this what death is like?

Of course it was a new body. That seed, whose name is Pip, had been planted by Farmer Joe and now, after many weeks, and with the help of careful watering and fertilising, Pip had started to grow into a small orange tree. After some years he grew into a tree – small, but big enough for young children to climb into his branches. He was so happy to hear their laughter. "I'm much more useful than if I'd been made into bread," he told himself.

And some time later he began to grow orange coloured balls on his arms. I think they're called 'oranges' and the arms are called 'branches'.

Pip had died, and was buried in the ground. But he came alive again with a different body. He was no longer an orange pip – he was now an orange tree.

Jesus said something like this:

An orange seed remains no more than a single pip unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces a whole orange tree."

Death is not the end of something. It's a beginning – the beginning of a new life.

TWO CAMELS TAKE A CRUISE

I'm one of the two camels that sailed with Noah during the Great Flood and I'd like to tell you what it was like. The first I heard about it was when Mrs Camel and I received this invitation by dove-post.

It said: "Noah, and his wife Joan, and his three sons and their wives cordially invite Mr and Mrs Camel to a cruise to celebrate the launching of their big ship, the Ark, which they have just finished building. The cruise will be held aboard the Ark and all food will be provided. You are advised to pack some wet weather gear as the forecasts are for a very heavy rainstorm. Just follow the bird who brought you this invitation."

"What's 'rain'?" Mrs Camel asked. "I've never heard that word before."

"It must be something like sand," I said. "You know, the sand storms we get sometimes when the wind blows from the east and you have to close up your nostrils. But I don't know what he means by 'wet weather gear'"

So we packed the few things we thought we'd need and then followed the little bird until we came to this large desert. In the middle of the desert was a huge wooden boat. It was over 50 camel-lengths long and it had three decks. The strange thing, though, was that it was propped up on dry land. There was no sea, no river, no lake anywhere to be seen.

"It doesn't look as if we're going very far on this so-called cruise," I commented to Mrs Camel.

But although there was no water, there were plenty of other animals. They had also been invited. I recognised Mr and Mrs Elephant and a couple of tall giraffes. But there were many other strange animals I'd never see before, including one pair that just hopped about all over the place.

"How ever is Mr Noah going to squeeze the elephants and the giraffes into one of those cabins?" Mrs Camel asked me.

"I suppose he'll have to put them up on the roof," I said. "But why he'd want to invite them I don't know. Elephants and giraffes aren't any use to anybody. You are a she-camel and so you can give Noah milk and my fur can be made into cloth to keep him warm. But what good is a stiff-necked giraffe?"

"Yes," she replied, "they think they're above the rest of us, with their noses stuck up in the air."

"That's true," I said, "and I'm sure with those two elephants aboard we'll be in danger of tipping over. I don't know what Noah was thinking of when he invited them."

“He should have just invited more camels,” said my wife. “We don’t take up as much space as elephants and giraffes. And besides we don’t need much water. I think he’s going to run short of water for all these animals, stuck out here on this silly boat in the middle of a desert.”

“Yes,” I said, “you know how much water those elephants drink. I’m sure he’ll run out of water before the day’s out. Still, that’s not our problem, dear. We had a good drink before we came and that should last us a few weeks.”

We walked up the long ramp and were shown to our cabins. We must have been one of the last to get on board because not long after this, the ramp was pulled up.

“I don’t think I’m going to like this cruise,” my wife complained. “We’re stuck here in this dingy cabin that we have to share with two horses, a pair of chickens and a couple of pigs. They all smell different to us. I don’t think I’m going to get any sleep.”

“And there’s even a couple of spiders making a web in the corner,” I said. “We’re not going to getting any privacy either.”

My dear wife was beginning to wish she’d never come. “I think I want to go home.”

“I’m not sure we can,” I said. “They’ve pulled up the ramp. Let’s just see what happens.”

Well pretty soon the sun went down and it got very dark. Just then there was a loud noise. It sounded like a huge palm tree cracking and plunging to the ground only it was much, much louder. And then there was a sudden bright light, as if the sun had come out for a second and then went back in again. And then, through the small window of our cabin I saw something I’d never seen before. Water was coming out of the sky! It was as if a river had somehow got lifted up into the heavens and was pouring its water onto the ground. I’d never seen anything like it in all my life!

All this time the loud cracking noises and the flashing lights continued. Mrs Camel and I were a bit scared but nowhere near as scared as the hens. They were cackling loudly and running all over the cabin as if they’d had their heads chopped off. The horses were whinnying and stamping their hooves on the floor. The only animals that didn’t seem to be concerned were the pigs – they just kept on eating – .

Now I could understand why Noah brought horses and chickens along. Humans can ride on a horse and they eat chickens. And of course camels are the most useful creatures of all. But what’s the use of pigs and spiders? You can’t eat pigs, or at least Noah’s people were told they weren’t supposed to. And I don’t know if he was allowed to eat spiders but you wouldn’t get much of a meal out of those two. Noah would have done much better if he’d invited only camels. You can ride on a camel much better than on a horse – especially across a sandy desert.

“I think I want to go home, Humpy,” said my dear wife. “Do go and see if there’s any way of getting off. Perhaps we could just jump.”

So I made my way to the upper deck where the ramp had been and as I did so I noticed that the floor was moving gently, from left to right and back again. It was hard to keep steady on my feet.

When I got up on deck I found out why. We were no longer in the middle of a large desert. By some sort of strange magic it was now a huge lake and the Ark was floating, bobbing up and down. And all this time the river in the sky was emptying itself in cascades of water onto the deck. I didn’t know how quickly to get back inside. I went back down to our cabin.

“I’m afraid we can’t get off, dear. We’re in the middle of a lake and we seem to be under some giant waterfall.” I’d never seen a waterfall, but an old camel who’d travelled a lot told me about it once. I later found out that what was happening outside was to be called ‘rain’. The loud noises were ‘thunder’ and the bright flashes of light were called ‘lightning’. These words had to be made up, you know, because this was the first time rain or thunder or lightning had ever happened in the world. We sometimes had mists and dew but that was nothing like the buckets of water that were now dropping down from the sky.

Well it rained (I soon got used to this new word ‘rain’) and it rained, for forty days and forty nights and the water got deeper and deeper. And the Ark floated on top. Life on board was pretty uncomfortable but we weren’t complaining any more. I thought of all the poor camels who hadn’t been invited. They’d be drowned by now. I suppose all the other elephants and hens and spiders were drowned too but ... well ... they’re not so important because they’re different to camels.

You see, when God made the world he made it for us camels. He only created human beings so that they could look after us, as Noah was doing right now. Camels can do lots of things better than man, but one thing they can’t do is make boats. And God saw that if he was going to make man, for the camels, he’d better make other animals to feed man so that man wouldn’t have to eat camels. Ah, but then God seemed to get carried away creating just for the sake of creating – all sorts of weird creatures that were no good to camels or men. That was bad enough, but why Noah had to be so simple-minded as to try to *save* all those useless beasts I don’t know.

This just goes to show that we camels are much cleverer than men. If we’d been able to build the Ark we’d have invited only camels – oh, and perhaps a couple of men to steer the boat. Why they call us the ‘ships of the desert’ I don’t know because we don’t know one end of a boat from the other. Human beings do come in handy sometimes. But all the other animals are quite, quite useless because ... well ... they’re not like us – they’re not as clever as camels and they don’t know about boats, like Noah.

At one stage the rain was so hard that it came into the lower decks and started filling up the bottom of the boat. Noah did something that was very clever, for a human. He attached the elephants' trunks to long hoses and they sucked the water out of the bottom of the boat and blew it over the sides.

So I began to feel that perhaps it was a good thing that Noah had brought the elephants along. Perhaps there are three types of creatures worth saving – camels, men and elephants.

After a long, long time the rain stopped. Noah wanted to see if there was any dry land so he sent a small mole-rat up to the lookout at highest point of the Ark – that, of course was the head of one of the giraffes. Mm, perhaps giraffes could be useful sometimes, I suppose.

Then Noah sent out a raven but he never came back. He kept flying around until the water was completely gone down. So ravens are pretty useless. But then Noah sent out a dove and the dove came back. A week later he sent the dove out again and this time the dove came back with a fresh olive leaf in its beak. So there was dry land out there somewhere. Noah made a note of the direction he'd come from. Maybe doves have their uses, too.

Noah knew which direction to go to reach dry land. But how was he to get there? You see Noah had stupidly forgotten to provide any sails for the boat. He thought it didn't matter because all you had to do was to drift about until the water went down. But what if the Ark had drifted into the middle of the sea? The water might never go down!

Noah realised this eventually so he was desperate to find some way of harnessing the strong winds that had started blowing. First he needed a mast, but he'd left all his woodworking tools behind. These humans can be pretty dumb! Luckily he had a couple of beavers on board. They gnawed through some long timbers, that made up part of the upper deck, and made a couple of tall masts. The elephants managed to hoist them up. But now where could you get a sail?

Shem's wife had this bright idea of asking the spiders to weave a huge web. So the spiders wove all day and all night until there was an enormous web stretching from one mast to the other. But the wind just blew right through the gossamer fibres. You can't make a sail out of cobwebs.

It was then that I got my brilliant idea. I got the rats to gnaw off my fur, and the fur of all the furry creatures on board. We then got the sparrows and all the little birds on board to take these tufts of fur and to weave them into the web as if they were making a giant nest.

Soon the wind started to collect in this improvised sail, but we were going off in the wrong direction. We needed a rudder. It was then that the couple of hopping creatures came hopping up and said, "We can hang onto the back of the Ark and use our strong tails to act as rudders." So this is what they did. And so we moved off in more or less the right direction.

After many days we landed on dry land and there was this wonderful coloured picture that God must have drawn in the sky, to celebrate. Noah told us all to get off and go and have lots of little baby camels and baby kangaroos, and baby elephants and baby spiders so that we could repopulate the world. So, you see, by our brilliant idea of using fur for sails, we camels saved the world – though most of the animals were so different to camels that they weren't worth saving. Oh yes, I suppose elephants and giraffes, and doves and kangaroos and spiders and a few other types of animals and birds do have their place.

But why God created pigs and why Noah was bothered to save them I still don't know. Perhaps the day might come when human beings would be allowed to eat pig meat. Then maybe even pigs would be useful. God was very wise in creating many different animals of all shapes and sizes. They all have different gifts and are useful in many different ways. There's a community in the animal kingdom, just as there is in the human family.

Many children are quite different to you and it's very easy to believe that because they're different they're somehow less important. Some children have a different coloured skin. But they're our brothers and sisters in God's family. Some children are blind, or can't walk. But God loves them and has a purpose for them. Some children go to different types of schools or live in different types of housing or play different sports or like different sorts of music.

Some of God's children aren't children any more. They have wrinkles and walking sticks and talk about things that happened a long time ago. But they're part of God's family too and are just as important as you who are young.

And when you get older, and have families of your own, you'll develop certain very strong views about the church, and the way this country should be run, and the sort of people your children ought to spend their lives with. It will be very easy to say, like the camel, that if someone is different to you then they must be wrong and if they're very different you should have nothing whatsoever to do with them.

Some people even say things like "if they're going to do that I'm leaving this church". But the Church is God's family. God created many different types of animals, many different types of human beings with many different ways of looking at his world.

Of course you should still work out what's right for you and what God wants you to do and not to be carried away by every new idea.

But remember that Jesus mixed with people very different to himself. He didn't run away from those who lives were different from His. God wants us to be different from one another, yet love one another despite those differences and, perhaps even *because* of those differences.

THE THREE WISE CAMELS

We all know the story of the three wise men. They came from the east on their camels and followed the star until it stood over the manger at Bethlehem.

But among the camels in the hot, dry, sandy parts of the world, the story is told from a different perspective – from the point of view of camels. As they relax around the cool waters of the oasis after a long and dusty ride across the desert they tell each other stories and the story of the Three Wise Camels is one of their favourites.

Some years ago I went camel riding in Egypt and heard the following story. I'm not one hundred per cent sure if it's true, or not, but I did get it straight from the camel's mouth. And a camel has never been known to tell a lie. So let me tell it in his own words – except that I have translated it from Cammelish, the language of camels.

Many years ago there came from the east three wise camels in search of he who was born to be the King of the Jews. Wise camels, you say? Many say that camels are incredibly stupid, but of course we all know that it's very clever to seem not to understand something when you don't want to obey orders.

The word had got around among the camels of a land in the east in which a very special baby had just been born – a baby who was the Son of God. They decided to send three of their wisest camels to go on an expedition to welcome him. But you can't have camels going off on their own. It just isn't done. So they had to look around for three riders to come with them.

They found three very clever men who had also heard of the birth of this very special baby. They knew a lot about the stars and they believed that the stars could tell what was going to happen here on earth. I suppose it's like the way we camels can tell if there's going to be a sandstorm by the colour of the sky.

One of these clever men said to the others "You see the planet Jupiter has just entered the constellation of Aries. As we all know, Aries is the symbol of the Jews and Jupiter symbolises a king. The eastern sky means birth. So the fact that Jupiter is now visible in the eastern sky at sunrise, in the constellation of Aries, means that a new king of the Jews has just been born." We camels didn't understand any of this, but it did sound very clever and quite important.

When humans tell this story they call it the story of the Three Wise Men. But, as you'll see, these three men were clever but not all that wise. We camels call it the story of the Three Wise Camels.

The three clever men set off on the three wise camels and they followed a star. They thought that all they had to do was to follow the star like a beacon until it stopped right over

the place where the baby was born. That's what I mean by saying that the men were not really very wise.

Of course it didn't work like that. The star was just to tell them that something rather special had happened and that the baby king was to be found in the land of the Jews. In the end the three clever men had to go to Herod to ask, "where is he that is born King of the Jews?" Herod said he didn't know, but if they did find such a baby they were to report back to him. So how *did* they find the baby Jesus?

Well, if it wasn't for the three wise camels the three clever men would never have found the baby Jesus.

You humans probably don't know that we camels have got wonderful hearing. Our ears are small and are lined with fur to filter out the sand but we can hear the sound of the many hooves on the sand of a camel caravan many dunes away. Well these three wise camels had miraculous hearing and by putting their heads up when the wind blew across the deserts from far-off Judea they could hear the sounds made by the baby Jesus.

Now these weren't the sounds of a baby crying because we're told that "little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes". No, these sounds that drifted over the vast distances were the sounds of the baby Jesus gurgling. Jesus gurgled with the joy that God brings to the world, in a way that only a King can gurgle. This unmistakable sound of joy was the sound that the camels could hear, and they followed that sound, carrying their riders with them.

Those three wise camels came to worship Jesus and as they reached the stable where he was lying in a manger they knelt down in adoration before him. We camels, as you know, are one of the few animals that can kneel, and this accounts for our knobbly knees. Well the three wise riders got off their camels and, because they'd seen *us* kneel, they got the idea and so they also kneeled.

Those three clever men had come, bringing gifts to the new-born king. One man was the king of Sheba. He'd brought a golden crown and this he gave it to Jesus in acknowledgement of his kingship.

Another was the high priest of Ephah and he had a jewelled box containing pieces of frankincense. These yellow lumps were burnt in the ceremonies of worship in the temple of Ephah, giving off holy fragrance. In giving this to Jesus he was acknowledging that Jesus was worthy of true worship.

The third rider was the chief embalmer of the Egyptian Pharaohs. He had brought, as a gift to Jesus, a jar of precious myrrh. Myrrh was a sweet-smelling substance that was used to prepare the dead Pharaohs for burial. This gift was an acknowledgement that the mission for which Jesus had come into the world was to die for the sins of man.

Now that's what I mean when I say that these three men, though clever, were not very wise. I mean how impractical for a new born baby, on a cold and wintry night, are gold, frankincense and myrrh. Luckily the three wise camels brought some more useful gifts.

The first wise camel was Harry the Hairy Camel. He allowed Joseph to comb off lots of loose hair from his back and Mary was able to make a little camel hair blanket for the baby Jesus. Jesus snuggled up underneath it and was warm and cosy.

The second wise camel was Molly. She gave some fresh, warm camel milk for the baby Jesus. But the gift of the third camel, Bert, was perhaps the most useful gift of all.

You see it was a cold December night and the family had no wood with which to make a fire. As all camels know, our hard, dry, droppings are used as a fuel in the desert. Yes people burn our poo! So Bert gave a quantity of camel poo so that Joseph could light a small fire to keep the baby Jesus warm.

When he was older, Jesus really learnt to appreciate the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh because he learnt what they stood for. But on that cold winter's night when he was thirsty and cold I'm sure he appreciated the gifts of the camels more – the gifts of camel hair, camel milk and camel poo from the three wise camels.

THOMAS THE TANK ELEPHANT

A long time ago – well, actually, it was this time last year – there lived an elephant called Thomas. He lived and worked in the jungles of Thailand, moving huge logs around. Unlike the elephants in India he didn't have a little man sitting on his back, telling him what to do. Elephants in Thailand are trained to work on their own.

One of Thomas's jobs was to pull a heavy cart, piled with logs, along a temporary rail track they built in the jungle. He was the strongest of all the elephants and the other elephants called him "Thomas the Tank Elephant".

Everything went fine, until one day a mischievous monkey came out of the jungle and sat on his back.

"Why are you working so hard?" asked the monkey.

"I'm helping my master," said Thomas.

"But why do you want to do that?"

"Because he looks after me."

"But how do you know he will *always* look after you. Where is he now?"

"Oh, he's just over the hill there, cutting down some more trees. When it's lunch time he'll come back and give me some food and water."

"I don't see him. Are you sure he'll come back? He might have run off and left you here all by yourself – to starve!"

"But he always *does* come back."

The monkey laughed. "How silly you are. Just because he always *has* doesn't mean to say he always *will*. After all, during the monsoon season it rains every day. And then one day it stops. Can you *prove* that he will return?"

"Well, no. I can't prove that he will."

"I don't believe that he even exists! I can't see him."

His master did come back, as he always did, but this set Thomas thinking. He thought all the rest of that day and all that night. Perhaps you can't trust anything you can't prove.

The next morning he was standing near a group of trees. Another elephant walked passed by, on his way to work.

“Come on, you’ll be late for work.”

Thomas just sighed. “I’m so, so, thirsty.”

“Well all you have to do is to walk down to the river there and drink.”

“But how do I know that the ground will support me. I’m very heavy you know.”

The other elephant was puzzled. “But the ground looks solid. And besides you’ve walked down to the river many times before.”

“But the poachers are very clever. What if they dug a trap during the night and covered the hole with branches and leaves?”

“I don’t see any branches and leaves. It’s sand all the way down to the river.”

“That’s it, you see. The poachers are very clever. They might have covered the branches and leaves with sand. I might start walking and whoosh – I might fall into a deep pit.”

The other elephant walked off, down to the river, and came back a few minutes later. “There,” he said, “I’ve just been down to the river and back and I didn’t fall into any trap.”

“You must have been lucky where you walked. I might tread in different places.”

“OK,” said the other elephant, getting a little annoyed. “I’ll walk back again and you place your feet in the places where I tread.”

So the other elephant walked slowly back to the river while Thomas trod in his footprints. Eventually they got to the river without either of them falling into a trap. The other elephant walked into to the clear, refreshing water and drank. “Come on,” he said to Thomas.

“I don’t know how deep it is. I can’t see the bottom.”

“But you can see me standing up. You can see that it’s not very deep.”

“But what if I don’t stand exactly where you stand? It might be deep in other places. After all, I can’t see your footprints under the water.”

The other elephant was getting very frustrated. “Well why don’t you stand on this river bank and reach down into the water with your trunk. Look, I’m standing there and it’s supporting my weight.”

So after the other elephant moved away, Thomas carefully moved and stood there. Just then the river bank collapsed and Thomas toppled down into the water. It wasn’t deep and the water was refreshingly cool. He suddenly forgot all his fears and started splashing around. The other elephant sucked up a trunkful of water and squirted it all over Thomas and Thomas did the same in return.

He realised that although you have to be a bit careful from time to time you can’t go through life only believing what you can prove. You do have to put trust in things that seem reasonable but which you can’t prove. That’s called faith.

You can’t prove that the ground will hold you up, but you believe it to be true and you walk around knowing it will. One day some of your friends might say, “Are you a Christian? Do you believe in God? I don’t see Him. Can you prove that He exists? It’s silly to believe in something you can’t prove. It’s unscientific.” And you will know what to say to them. You can’t *prove* that when you eat an ice cream it won’t taste yukky, but you don’t let that stop you eating one. You can’t *prove* that your parents love you but you know it is true. Faith is where you believe something that you know is true, even if you can’t prove it.

THE MONKEY WHO WANTED TO BE A BOY

I want to tell you a story about a monkey I once knew, called Mickey. He lived in a far-off country called India, in the jungle, near a small town. He often walked through the streets, but the people just chased him away.

“Quick, catch that monkey,” they cried, and he had to run as fast as he could, back into the trees.

“Oh, I wish I was a person,” he said to himself, “then I could walk down the street without being chased away. How can I become a person?”

“Mr Elephant,” he said to his big friend with a long trunk, “I want to be a person. You’re the wisest animal in the jungle. What can I do to become a person?”

The elephant scratched his head with his trunk and thought for a long time. “I once wanted to become a person,” he said, “but I couldn’t find any clothes big enough to fit me. You can’t be a person if you don’t wear clothes!”

“That’s it,” thought Mickey, “all I have to do is to find some clothes. I know I’m not very big but perhaps I might be able to find some little boy’s clothes. Then I could walk down the street and, instead of chasing me away, they would say, “oh what a nice little boy. What’s *your* name my little man?”

“Well, it might work,” said the elephant, somewhat doubtfully. He actually thought Mickey would look ridiculous in little boy clothes, but he was too polite to say so.

So Mickey ran off to the river’s edge, where the mothers of the town would wash their clothes and lay them out to dry in the sun. He crept up to a rock and, when they were looking the other way, he found a little pair of blue shorts and a T-shirt that had a picture of Santa Claus and the words “Dear Santa”. They had been in the sun all morning and were now almost completely dry. So Mickey took the clothes, and put them on. Like Goldilocks and the three bears, they were *just* right.

Mickey didn’t bother with shoes or socks, because the little boys of the village always ran around in bare feet. So off he went into the centre of town, pretending to be a little boy. He even tried to whistle, because that’s what little boys do, but no sound came out except for a few shrieks.

“Look at that ridiculous monkey, wearing clothes,” they said, “let’s catch him!”

So, poor Mickey had to run away again, as fast as he could. He went back to Mr Elephant. "It's no use," said Mickey, "I need something more than just little boy clothes."

"Well, of course," said Elephant, "you must be able to talk like people if you want to be a person. Go to the edge of the village and listen to the people talking, and see if you can make the same sounds."

"Of course," said Mickey, "if I could talk the way they do they'd know I wasn't a monkey."

So that night he went and sat in the trees at the edge of the village. He looked through the leaves and saw a large group of people, in a clearing, all talking to one another. "I'll just listen," he said to himself, "and I'll learn to talk like them."

But soon the talking stopped, and Mickey heard some music. The people were all looking at something at the edge of the clearing. Mickey moved to another branch so that he could see what it was that they were looking at. It was a house in a big storm. There was a girl outside and seemed to be terribly frightened by the wind that was blowing bits of timber and sheets of iron around the house.

Have you ever seen the film the Wizard of Oz? Well this was an open-air picture show, and everyone was watching the Wizard of Oz. Mickey was fascinated and he settled back on his branch and watched.

Now if you've ever seen The Wizard of Oz you'll know that the little girl's name was Dorothy. Her house had been blown away by a very strong wind that goes round and round, and eventually she landed in a strange country called Oz. There she met a scarecrow, who had no brains, a cowardly lion and a tin man who had no heart.

"I've got it," said Mickey to himself. "To be a person I have to find courage, a heart, and a brain." He ran off to tell Elephant.

"Well, it might work," said Elephant somewhat doubtfully, "it's worth a try."

"Where would I find some courage, a heart and a brain?" asked Mickey. "Would I have to go to the Land of Oz?"

"No, you might find those things on the top of that far-off mountain."

He didn't really think Mickey would find anything there, but as it would take Mickey a long time to get there and back he thought he'd get some peace for a few days if he sent him there. Elephants are not unkind, but you have to remember that they hate being asked ridiculous questions all the time.

So Mickey went off, and with much effort, after two days of walking and climbing, he reached the top of the mountain. Now I wonder if you can guess what he found there, nestled in between two rocks. It was an eagle's eyrie. That's the nest that the eagle builds in a high place. And in that nest were two things. One of them you'd expect to find in an eagle's eyrie. It was a large egg, and the eagle was sitting on it, waiting for it to hatch. But the other was the last thing you'd expect to find in an eagle's nest. It was a little, pink, human baby.

What the baby was doing there I can only guess. My guess is that the eagle had swooped down and *stolen* the baby from its mother. And why had she done this? My guess is that she thought that when the egg hatched the little baby eagle would need some fresh meat.

The baby was crying, not because it knew that it was intended to be the baby eagle's first dinner – she didn't know that. No, she was crying because she was cold, and she wanted her mother.

Mickey said to himself, "this must not be". Somehow I must carry that baby back down to her mother. But although the baby was only small, so was Mickey, and he soon realised that there was no way he'd be strong enough to carry the baby down the mountain.

He said to himself, "what would Elephant do?" Then he realised how silly the question was because there was no way an elephant could have climbed that mountain. "I have to think this out for myself," he said to himself. In a single moment he not only thought of an idea, he also carried it out. Quick as a blink he took the egg from under the eagle and stood back a little way.

"Now listen very carefully, I will say this only once. I want you to fly the little baby back down to the village. I'll meet you there with your egg, and if the baby is returned safely I'll give your egg back to you. But if you harm that baby, or attack me, I'll throw your egg over the edge.

The eagle could see that if she wanted to see her precious baby hatch, she had to return the human baby. So she agreed.

Now you all know that climbing down a mountain is a lot harder than climbing up. It's especially so if you're holding onto a fragile egg on the way down. The egg wasn't heavy, but eggs are smooth and don't come with handles. What's more, monkeys don't have backpacks they can put eggs into. Mickey needed two hands to hold the egg, which left no hands to hold onto things to keep his balance.

Mickey knew that if anything happened to that egg the eagle wouldn't keep the baby safe. Several times he nearly dropped the egg, and several times he nearly lost his footing and almost went over the edge. But, at last, he was safely down the mountain with the egg. The eagle was there with the baby. And the baby was crying, which was good, because if you hear a baby cry you usually know he's alright – just a bit hungry, or tired or something.

The exchange was made and the eagle flew off with her egg. Just then some people came along. Now you'd have thought they would have thanked Mickey for going to so much trouble to rescue the baby. Not at all. They thought *he* was the one who had stolen the baby and they started throwing stones at him.

“Look at that bad monkey who has stolen that baby. Monkeys do that you know. Quick, throw stones at it and make it run away.”

So Mickey had to run away. He ran and ran and at last he met up with his friend the elephant.

“I went to *so* much trouble to climb that mountain and it was all for nothing. I didn't find courage, I didn't find a heart, and I didn't find any brains. All I found was a baby, and look at all the thanks I got for rescuing it!”

Now Elephant was really quite wise when he put his mind to it. “You know,” he said, “I think I can tell you why you didn't find those things.”

“Why,” said Mickey, “because they weren't there?”

“Not exactly,” said Elephant, “you couldn't find them on the mountain because they were already there inside of you. You decided to rescue that poor baby, which shows that you already have a heart. You don't need another one. And your most clever plan for rescuing the little one, why I wouldn't have thought of that. So you see, you already had a brain – you didn't need to go looking for another one. And you showed great courage in getting that egg safely down the mountain. There you see, you already had great courage.”

Mickey thought about it and saw that Elephant was right. “So I'm a person after all.”

“No, said Elephant, “you're still a monkey. But you're the bravest, most intelligent, most caring monkey in the whole world. Some things you cannot change, other things you can. And some things don't need changing – you just have to realise that you already have them.”

“So I'll never be a person?” asked Mickey.

“You're a monkey. But there's nothing wrong with that. You wanted to be a little boy. But you're braver than a little boy, you have more heart than a little boy, and you are cleverer than a little boy.”

“And I can climb trees better than a little boy.”

“Exactly, you can climb trees much better than a little boy. So you’re much better off the way you are. Only, take off those clothes – they make you look ridiculous!”

God makes us all different. Some of us are born with special abilities. Others are just ordinary. A few are born with handicaps. We must try to make the most of the abilities we have but we have to accept the fact that there are some things we cannot change. Some well-meaning people say that you can be anything you want to be. You just have to believe in yourself.

That’s all very well and that advice helps some people to work hard to achieve their goals. But that same advice can make other people very sad because they are trying to be what they are not.

Are you good at maths? What about sport? Perhaps you are good at both. I used to believe that anyone can do well in maths if only they’re taught properly. That’s it – blame the teacher! But I have since come to believe that this only works up to a point. It appears to me that some people are hard-wired for maths and they can do well no matter how bad their teacher is. Other people will always struggle, even though a good teacher and hard work can make a big difference.

But maths is not the only subject that some people are good at. Some people are good at creative writing. Some kids never do well at school, even though they try hard. But they may be good at sport.

But what if you don’t seem to be particularly good at anything? God has given everybody the most important gift of all – the ability to bring love to others. To be an ordinary person, who’s pretty ordinary with most things, can be a special part of a loving family, or a special friend to others.

Have any of you played Monopoly? Some people seem to have all the bad luck with the throw of the dice. They might say that it’s not fair that the dice made them land on Mayfair or send them to jail without passing Go.

Why doesn’t God make the dice come up double six every time? Well, if He did so, the game would be very boring.

You could say that God isn’t fair. He made some of his creatures as people, and he made others monkeys. But like a good parent God’s love is fair and He values you not because you’re rich, or because you’re famous or because you’re successful. He values you to the extent that you let Him show His love to others through the things you do, whether they be family, friends, strangers, or even race horses and monkeys.

THE VENTRILLOCAT

One morning, as Alice was walking through Wonderland searching for the Queen of Hearts' castle, she came across a fence, and in this fence was a stile – a sort of step that can help you climb over the fence.

“Now should I go left or right, or should I climb over that stile,” she said to herself. Just then she saw a crooked old man on the other side of the stile. He was all bent over with arthritis, he was holding a crooked walking stick, and at his feet was a mangy cat with a crooked tail. It reminded Alice of that nursery rhyme.

There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile.
He found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked stile.
He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse,
And they all lived together in a little crooked house.

“I’m looking for the Queen of Hearts castle. Do you know which way I should go?”

“That depends on what time you want to arrive. If you go this way you’ll get there by lunch time,” said the crooked man in a crooked voice. Now, the curious thing about this man's voice wasn’t so much its crookedness, but the fact that it didn't quite seem to match the movements of his crooked mouth. It was like a film where the lips and the voice don’t match up. “But if you don’t want to get there till tea time you should go that way.”

“But of course I want to go the shortest way.”

“Do you mean the shortest way or the quickest way? They’re not the same thing you know.”

“Well, of course I want the quickest way,” said Alice crossly. “I’m in a hurry.”

“In that case you should climb over this stile and walk along that crooked path. It’s about a mile. But before I can let you pass I have a tale to tell you – one with a twist in the ending.”

Although she said she was in a hurry, she wasn’t really, and besides she loved stories, especially those with surprise endings. So she sat down on the grass and asked him to begin, which he did in his strange, out of synch, voice. Meanwhile the crooked cat just rolled over and began to groom itself.

“One fine day in the middle of the night – stop me if you’ve heard this before.”

“I think I have,” said Alice politely.

“Rubbish, you can’t have. I’m just making it up for the first time. Let me go on. One fine day in the middle of the night”

Alice objected: “But how can *that* be? Was it *day* or *night*?”

“Both,” he explained.

“But day and night are opposites,” she protested. “It can’t be *both* day and night at the same time.”

“Well it was ten o’clock in the morning by the watch on his left arm and ten o’clock at night by the watch on his right.”

“But surely both watches must have been telling the same time,” objected Alice. “Ten o’clock is the same whether it’s AM or PM – big hand on 12 and ...”

“If you keep interrupting me I’ll never finish my story. One fine day in the middle of the night ... I met a man in tears and she told me ...”

“Wait there,” said Alice. “Was it a *man* or a *woman*?”

“Yes,” replied the old man.

“Was it a man?”

“Yes, didn’t I say so?”

“But then you said ‘she’. Was it a woman?”

“Of course you dummy – ‘*she*’ usually means a woman.”

“So she was *both*?”

“Yes, of course he was,” replied the crooked man impatiently. Now are you going to let me finish the story? I’ve lost my train of thought. Never mind I’ll wait for the next one. Oh, here it comes. All aboard! Now let me see. One fine day in the middle of the night I met a man in tears and she told me that her two dead brothers were fighting. Back to back they faced each other. They drew their swords and shot each other. A blind man went to see fair play. A dumb man went to shout ‘hooray’.”

Alice laughed. “It’s just that nonsense rhyme my good friend Mr Dodgson once told me. It’s not *supposed* to make sense. I think you’re just making fun of me. You must allow me to pass,” demanded Alice, getting a little cross. The old man began to hobble away, but the crooked cat didn’t follow him.

“Cranky old man,” said a voice from where the man had been standing. Alice looked all around her. There was nobody else there, and by now the crooked man was some distance away. Then she looked at the cat.

“That old man’s deaf and dumb, you know,” said the cat. “He didn’t hear a word you were saying.”

Alice was amazed. It was the crooked cat who was talking. What’s more, its crooked voice was the same as that of the crooked man, who was by now a long way off.

“So it was *you* doing the talking all this time. That’s why the old man’s lips were out of synch.”

“Indeed it was I,” replied the cat in a rather less wobbly voice. My name is Max. You look like an Alice. I’m what you call a ‘ventrilocat’. Did you notice that my lips didn’t move?”

Alice had once seen a ventriloquist at a party. He had a little wooden doll that sat on his lap and he could make the dummy’s lips move by moving a special lever. Because the ventriloquist’s lips didn’t seem to move it looked like it was the dummy who was talking.

“I can’t say that I was looking,” said Alice, still stunned with amazement. “Well you didn’t finish the story. The old man – I mean you – promised me a twist at the end of the tale.”

The cat put its twisted tail into the air and started to move it back and forth like a metronome.

“Is that tail twisted enough for you?”

“So, do you belong to that old man?” asked Alice.

“Cats don’t belong to anyone. It’s people who belong to cats. Besides I’ve never seen him in my life before. You see I just arrived here yesterday.”

“You don’t come from Cheshire by any chance?”

“No, no,” said the cat. “I’m a Swiss cat – from Geneva. I just love Swiss cheese!”

“I’m amazed,” gasped Alice. “Not that a cat can talk, but that a Swiss cat could talk English with no accent.”

“Je suis un excellent meemic,” he said in a French accent.

“So what brought you to this country?”

“My master, back in Geneva, was very cruel to me. He kept putting me in a box with a bottle of poison and a lump of something. He was heartless. From inside the box I would hear him say to his friends ‘it is impossible to tell whether the cat is alive or dead until you open the box – he is therefore simultaneously both alive and dead’. Well, if I was still alive it was no mystery to me!”

“And so you survived.”

“Often I survived, but sometimes I died. Of course when he opened the box I was either completely dead or completely alive.”

“But how could you come alive after you were dead. That's impossible!”

“So you don't you believe in resurrection?”

“Well, yes, but the resurrection of Jesus was special. Cats don't resurrect.”

“Haven't you heard of cats having nine lives? What do you think that means? Anyway it's no great feat to resurrect a cat. To resurrect a *person*, that's much more of a miracle. But when Jesus was in the tomb? Was he dead or alive?”

“Well he was dead when he went in and alive when he came out.”

“So for the three days he was in the tomb he was simultaneously dead and alive,” said the ventrillocat, “just like me in the box. Anyway when I was onto the last of my nine lives I decided to run away to sea. I survived on the ship's rats. But one day I was too close to the anchor and my poor tail got tangled up in the chains. I nearly became a Manx cat, you know the sort that don't have tails. But a kind sailor bound up my tail with a rag and some pitch. My tail healed but it grew crooked. Now where did you say we were going? Oh, yes, the Queen of Hearts castle. Follow me.”

They soon found themselves walking along a dusty lane. After some time they saw a horse looking over a fence. “Good morning,” it said in a very proper English voice. “Wonderful weather we're having for this time of year.”

Alice looked around in amazement. Then she laughed. “I suppose it was you,” she said to Max. Indeed it was. Whenever they passed any animal it greeted them in a different voice. But all the time it was the cat.

Soon they reached the outskirts of a village. There was a pond with little fluffy ducklings swimming among the reeds. These all said “good morning” in high pitched voices – all courtesy of Max of course.

At last they came to a village and Max stopped outside a cake shop. “If you ask here they should be able to tell you where to find the Queen of Hearts. I heard that the Knave of Hearts stole some tarts from this shop only yesterday. But I have to go now. I must go and chase the mice from underneath my mistress’s chair.”

At this he began to disappear. First his face and then his body, until all Alice could see were his eyes and the crooked tail. The tail waved goodbye and vanished. Finally the eyes winked and they too vanished the cat was completely invisible.

Have you ever seen a ventriloquist? The voice seems to come from a dummy but it really comes from a man who can speak without his lips moving.

When God spoke to the prophets of old His voice usually seemed to come down from the sky. “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” When Jesus spoke his lips moved like an ordinary man. But when the Holy Spirit speaks to us His voice comes from inside of us.

Pentecost is the day when God sent the Holy Spirit into the world. Actually God’s spirit had been quietly working in people’s lives before that time, but Pentecost was the special time when the disciples really became aware of it in a spectacular way.

When God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit you can’t see His lips move. It’s a voice within us. Not a real voice that makes you look around to see who it is. Inside your head you have many thoughts. Not all of them are God’s voice. But if you listen carefully you can learn to sort out which is God’s voice from all the other voices. Whenever you are urged to do a good thing you know it is God speaking to you.

Prayer is the way we talk to God, and you don’t have to pray out loud. Prayer also involves listening to Him. But when God speaks to us in return it isn’t a voice that you hear with your ears. It comes from within your own thoughts.

The Holy Spirit is like a ventriloquist. You don’t see His lips move. The voice seems to come from inside your own head, inside your own thoughts. But if you practice prayer you can come to recognize, in some of these thoughts, the voice of God.

THE MAN WHO LOST GOD

Imagine a desolate landscape, featureless except for a few stunted trees and some brown thirsty grass trying bravely to stand upright. A hot wind blows across this scene but there is so little vegetation that its effect is visible only by the way it ruffles the cloak of a traveller who makes his way along the disused river bed.

Presently Godwin, for that is his name, sees a shepherd standing on one of the high banks and calls out to him.

“Hey there! I'm on my way to Heaven. Is this the way?”

“I am the Way”, said Jesus, the Shepherd. “My Father is your Destination.”

“You don't seem to understand me”, said Godwin climbing up the bank. “You see, I recently died in the other world and being a church member, I'm headed for Heaven. Except that I seem to have lost my way, so can you show me how to get there?”

“Heaven is not a place”, said Jesus quietly. “Heaven is a relationship with my Father.”

“No such place!” cried Godwin in surprise. “Of course there's such a place.”

“My Father is the One whom you seek. I will take you to Him.”

“I don't mean to be rude my good fellow but I'm not looking for anybody, let alone a shepherd who doesn't know his way around, or his old father. I'm looking for a city – the New Jerusalem they call it. Perhaps you know it by that name? You enter it through huge golden gates covered in pearls and the streets are paved with gold.”

“You are mistaken”, said Jesus, “there is no such place. These are just ways of describing the wonderful joy that you will find when you are re-united with my Father for it was to be with Him that He created you. Let me take you to Him. Our house is just over that small hill.”

“Well, if you call it a house it must be a rather magnificent one if it's Heaven. Oh yes, there's something in the Bible about a mansion with many rooms, isn't there? Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go – they're expecting me”.

Jesus looked at him in silence. His face revealed both great anger and great pity. Without a word he began to walk towards the hill. Godwin climbed the bank and caught up with him.

“You see, I did a lot for the church in the other world”, he chatted, quite ignorant of the shepherd's identity. “I gave quite a bit of money to help the missionaries. Not that I did it all to get rewarded in Heaven of course. Still it's nice to know that what you've done has been recognised. I wonder if I'll get a room with a view. I suppose the whole place must be surrounded by beautiful gardens. It must be quite an oasis in all this desert!”

By this time they had reached the top of the hill and at the bottom of the shallow valley on the other side was a shepherd's hut surrounded by a low stone wall.

“I thought you said that the heavenly mansion was close by. All I can see is a little shed.”

Jesus pointed to the homely dwelling. “*That* is my Father's house.”

“I didn't ask to see *your* father's house”, said Godwin impatiently. “I want God's house.”

“But I am God's Son. This is our house”, said Jesus. His look of anger and pity became more intense. “Don't you know me?”

“Don't give me that! God wouldn't live in a little farm cottage like that! He created the whole universe so I'm sure he'd do better than that for himself.”

“My Father lives in many houses. He created you to live with us in this one. It's very comfortable. Won't you come home and sup with us?”

“If you really are the Son of God, why don't you command this cottage to become a golden palace?”

“Neither wood, nor stone, nor gold can satisfy your soul. Only God Himself can satisfy the deep longings that once you felt in your heart. I can see that you have managed to stifle them. Those desires that remain are shallow and self-contradictory and it is impossible for God to satisfy them.”

“But I thought God could do anything”, said Godwin.

“He was able to create the universe from a void. He brings forth life from a tiny seed. Through me He conquers sin and death. But He cannot satisfy the desires of one who thirsts for water yet cries out for sand to quench that thirst. I must return to my Father alone.”

Godwin turned his back on Christ and the little cottage. As he walked away he noticed that the sky began to glow red as in a sunset.

The red became deeper and more intense until the whole sky was as blood. A cry of agony split the stillness.

Terrified, Godwin ran back but the little cottage had gone and in its place was a figure nailed to a cross of wood.

Soon, both figure and cross disappeared and Godwin was left alone.

The sky grew darker and the air grew colder, and as the sky became quite black, Godwin found that he could no longer feel the earth beneath his feet. Yet he had no sensation of falling. He was suspended in a void. He was alone in a dark, cold and empty universe.

THE GUIDED TOUR

“I'm afraid you'll have to move on now,” said the guide, “there's another party coming up behind.”

Simon had been propelled by the crowd for longer than he could remember and once again his group was moved on. He was not sure why he had come into this art gallery in the first place or indeed if he had ever come in. It seemed that as long as he could remember he had been part of this human wave which surged inexorably past paintings and sculptures that he didn't really understand.

“What's the point of it all?” he asked the man beside him. “I wish I'd never come.”

“Does there have to be a point to everything?” the man asked in return, “just have some fun. Look, there's another roulette table. Let's go over and give it a spin.”

There was a carnival atmosphere to this gallery for amongst the works of art there were hot dog stands, pin ball machines, fortune teller's booths and gaming tables. The crowds milled around them taking very little notice of the art. Simon and his new friend went up to the roulette table.

“Who's the old fellow in that picture?” Simon asked the croupier as he pointed to an oil portrait behind the table.

“Blowed if I know. I'd say he's been here longer than I have. I couldn't really say. There's a story that he's watched the wheel for so long that he knows which number will come up next. Come on now young man, what number will you lay your bet on?”

Soon they were hurried on once again until they came to a large room filled with statues that had been taken over by amusement booths. Almost no interest was being taken in the sculpture, except for one table where some of the small busts were being used for the game of hoopla.

“I'm afraid it's time to move on,” the guide announced, “those with red passes please make your way out of the door over there.”

“That's me,” said Simon's friend, “see you!”

A number of people moved off. Simon went to the door and looked through. On the other side of the door was a staircase. A few of the people went up the stairs but most the crowd were headed off downstairs.

There was an old man standing in the doorway who had an uncanny resemblance to the man in the portrait. He was dressed as an artist and he had his box of colours and his brushes in his hand.

“What's upstairs?” Simon asked curiously.

“My studio is up there,” he replied, “and there are many, many, galleries where I keep my best work.”

“I wonder why not very many people want to go upstairs?” asked Simon.

“Perhaps because there aren't any amusement machines or sideshows there – just the art. As you can see down here very few people are taking much notice of the art. It grieves me. I've offered to explain it to them but they just stare at me and walk off.”

“Then why do you put all these distractions here?”

“Oh no, these things weren't here originally, they've been set up by some of the visitors.”

“And you allow it?” asked Simon.

“For the present I do. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to keep moving. That's one of the few things we insist on. Come and I'll walk with you further.”

As they walked off, the artist explained that this was a cultural experiment. Visitors to the gallery were allowed to set up entertainments if they wished because the gallery director felt that art should not be forced on people. They had to be free to choose or reject it.

Every so often the artist interrupted his explanation to talk about a painting and as they proceeded along the galleries and through the large halls Simon's eyes were opened to the beauty of the art.

“How can all these people ignore such beautiful works of art?”, asked Simon some time later as they stood before a large canvas. “I could stand here for hours staring at this. There's so much in it.”

“I'm afraid you must move on,” insisted the artist, “gallery rules.”

“But it's such a pity to be rushed.”

“I'm pleased you feel this way but I can't let you linger here just now. When you move upstairs you'll have all the time you need.”

“But I won't enjoy it as much without you to explain things to me,” protested Simon.

“I'll be there too, by your side. You'll have no need to be afraid.”

“Well can we go up there right now?”

“You can only go up there when your number comes up,” was the artist's reply.

Simon was thrilled with the new insight he'd gained and was eager to share it with others around him, but mostly they were indifferent.

Much later, when they were in yet another great hall, Simon stood in front of a very large painting of a very beautiful garden. In the distance, at the end of a long path, stood a figure with outstretched arms, looking very much like the artist.

As Simon stared into the painting he felt that the figure was beckoning him to step closer. Simon moved closer to the painting and the figure in the painting kept beckoning.

Simon moved closer and closer to the beckoning figure until the most amazing thing happened. The noise of the crowd behind him began to diminish and he could hear the sound of gravel under his feet.

As Simon moved closer, the figure began to walk down the path towards him. The crowd noises were now very faint and in their place Simon could here birds singing and he could feel the warmth of the sun on his face.

The artist had moved down those converging painted lines that had somehow become a real gravel path. Simon reached out and touched the artist's outstretched hands.

“Welcome Simon!”

Meanwhile back in the crowded gallery the official guide was reading out some more numbers.

“There goes Simon,” said one of the group, and in the painting, at the end of the gravel path, there were now two figures engaged in deep conversation.

THE PETITION

In one corner of the beautiful gardens that surround Kingdom-Come Castle, a man was kneeling beside a flower bed, pulling weeds. The stillness was suddenly punctured by a series of impatient footsteps, striding up the path.

“I'm looking for a Mr Dunne – William B. Dunne. Where would I find him?”

“I don't know anybody of that name,” replied the gardener looking up from his work, “can I help you?”

“It's hardly likely. It's petitions, not petunias I've come about – this petition. I want to present it to the King and I was told to ask for Will B. Dunne of Kingdom-Come Castle. It's a nuisance that nobody here seems to have heard of him.

The gardener got to his feet and brushed the loose earth from his hands. “Perhaps you'd better let me see it ...”

The petitioner gave it to him and requested him to hold it by the edges so as not to make it grubby.

“Let's see what it says. ‘O your most majestic majesty, supreme ruler of this Kingdom, most wise and noble King ...’ Why did you begin like this?”

“You obviously don't know the first thing about petitions. Here, let me have it back and I'll try to find someone who can help.”

“Not until you tell me why you began like this. Was it out of a sense of your utter dependence on him?”

“Who me? Depend on the King? I should hope I can get by well enough on my own. No, you always start a petition this way, not that you'd know, only being a gardener!”

“So, the reason for those words?” asked the gardener.

“Well if you want something, you have to grovel first, you know, put the King in a good mood by buttering him up. If ever you need to petition the King I could show you how to do it. So if you don't mind, could I have my petition back? I'm really in quite a hurry.”

“Wait a moment, I thought you'd come for a talk. I'd like to show you around. The red carnations have just come out and they really are beautiful.”

“I'm sorry to be rude but I really am a busy man.”

“Busy? Doing what?”

You rustic fellows seem to have no idea how busy we men of the town can be. I'm afraid I've no time to waste gossiping about carnations. I've an important appointment at noon and I must present this document to the proper quarters before then.”

“But you've come to the right person, so why do you keep running off?”

“Well, why didn't you say that you were Bill Dunne, instead of wasting my time? And what is a court official like you doing dressed like that? It's not dignified.”

“No I'm not Mr Dunne and I find these clothes very comfortable for tending my flower beds. You see I am the King and these are my gardens.”

“Yes well, as I said Mr King, I haven't time to chat to you. As it's nearly noon I'd be grateful if you'd be so kind as to take this to Mr Dunne. Here's sixpence for your trouble.”

“But I'd like to go over the document with you and discuss the details. Now, this first one here – you've applied for a new post and you are asking me to influence those making the decision.”

“You don't seem to understand Mr King. “How can I explain it? I want His Majesty to pull a few strings. If you'd only make sure he gets it.”

“And why do you exactly need this new job?”

“Oh, I don't actually *need* it. I've got a very important job already. But it's a more powerful job and ...”

“And I suppose it would make you even busier than you are already.”

“ ‘The devil makes mischief for idle hands to do’, as they say. I try to get the most out of life by packing as much as I can into it. In fact it's years since I last wasted time like this chatting to a perfect stranger. I don't know why I'm doing it now.”

“Perhaps it might give your soul a chance to catch up with your body,” replied the Perfect Stranger. For it was in fact the King, the Lord God Himself. “And you say here that your aged mother is dying and you're praying for her recovery. A wonderful woman, your mother.”

“You know her?”

"Oh, yes, she comes here for a little time every day just to talk, or to sit and watch while I work."

"But that's impossible. She's been confined to bed for months now. You must be thinking of someone else."

"Her body is confined to bed, but not her mind and soul. Her spirit still comes by here each day. She waits patiently for the day when I free her from her worn-out body and bring her to live here permanently. Now to grant you your request would be to put off that day."

"I seem to be wasting my time. You're knocking back my requests one by one, but by what authority I'd like to know? Well, what about the promise that whatever you ask for you shall receive?"

"My promise is that whatever you ask *in my name* shall be granted to you."

"You mean that I should have addressed the letter to Mr King?"

"Why, you still don't know I am. You have never taken time to get to know me. Prayer isn't a formal list of requests. It's the time I spend with my friends, here in this garden. My friends know me and they allow me to get to know them. If they have any problems or requests, they bring them here and together we work something out."

"Goodness me, look at the time. I'll be late for my appointment. Well, it's been pleasant talking to you Mr King but you must excuse me now. I'll redraft the petition as you suggest. Good day now."

As he hurried off, clutching his petition, a sudden breeze swept him off his feet and he fluttered up into the air. For he had become a paper cut-out man, as flimsy as the petition he was still holding as he wafted up above the trees. For years he had cut himself off from the reality of God until he himself was no longer real.

THE CREATION WINDOW

On the side of a hill, just below the village of Needhamlet stands an old stone church. People used to come from all parts of the country to see the window that depicted the six days of Creation. It was shaped like a large wheel with six spokes radiating from the centre. Each of the six sections depicted a day in the creation story.

It was a magnificent piece of art that any cathedral would have been proud to have. Yet it was set in the wall of a little village church that was otherwise no different to others up and down the land. Many who came to see the Creation Window, as it was called, were deeply moved by it. It had a depth and a power that defied explanation.

On a certain wet Saturday afternoon, many years ago, a day that the people of Needhamlet will never forget, no sightseers came to the church. The sky was so dark that the lights were on in the church and the best view of the window would have been from outside. However the constant drizzle that oozed from the black clouds would have made this possibility uncomfortable.

The only people in the church were a handful of the regular congregation. And being a Saturday afternoon it wasn't the regular service of worship. Nor was there a bridegroom standing at the altar nervously waiting for his bride. Yet the people were waiting for something and the organ had been playing monotonously for almost an hour.

“What time did he say he would be here?”, asked one old lady.

“I'll read out the telegram again”, said a red-faced gentleman in the front row:
“PLEASE HELP STOP SERVICE IN VILLAGE STOP MEET SATURDAY THREE PM
AT PAYNES SIX DAIRY CLOSE STOP FEED MY SHEEP JESUS CHRIST”

“I can't get over the fact that *He* will be here. I mean imagine Jesus Christ coming to see us!”

“Oh He's not coming to see *us*, I expect it's our window. The telegram's a bit garbled the way they usually are, but He mentions the window panes and the six days of creation. It says ‘SIX DAIRY’ but I expect it means “six days”. And He's seems to be particularly interested in the panel with the sheep.”

“What shall we say to Him when He comes?” asked the old lady.

“Nothing,” replied another man who appeared to be in charge, “we've got everything all prepared. As soon as He arrives we go straight into the service. Now remember, we start with hymn 369, “Jesus we look to thee ... “

“Trust that Mrs Payne to let us down with the solo. There's no sign of her.”

“I haven't seen her in the village for days. She's probably too ashamed to show her face since they was forced to sell up.”

“Yes, I suppose it's hard on her and her little girls,” said one old farmer, “but of course it serves old Payne right. To sow your seed when he did is only to ask for trouble. These town folk just don't understand the ways of the land. The sooner he gets back to the town the better, that's what I say.”

Still they waited. But Christ did not appear. After another half hour, a young man entered the back of the church and stood for a moment. The water collected about his feet. He walked forward a few steps and gazed up at the Creation Window.

‘ere now, no sightseers please. Can't you see there's a service in progress,” said one of the ushers. He moved over to the stranger as if to lead him out. But the young man stood firm.

“I asked for your help in serving the needs of the village and so I waited for you up at the Payne's house in Dairy Close where the need is greatest at the moment. Instead I find you huddled together down here as if you're hiding from something. When you didn't come I had to minister to the family myself. But they were a bit frightened of me at first and it would have been so much better if you had been there too. Didn't you know that Tom Payne has been away all week in the town looking for work and Mrs Payne has been quite ill, so ill that the children have eaten very little for days.”

“But *we* wasn't to know,” said the old lady rather timidly, “nobody told us.”

“Love has a way of finding out,” Christ replied, for it was the Lord Himself standing there. “Inasmuch as you do not love your neighbour, you do not love me. Inasmuch as you do not *know* your neighbour you do not know me.”

As He said these words, the clouds must have parted for the sun came streaming through the Creation Window until all six panels were ablaze with light. The congregation looked up at it.

Once again Christ spoke. “My Father loves the *whole* of His creation, not just the parts of it that lie inside sanctified walls. He created you to share in this love and to share this love with others, not just each other. But you have ignored this. You are so preoccupied with the symbols of God's love of His creation that you ignore the real thing and its needs. Henceforth this church will be open to the needs of the world outside it.”

As He said these words small pieces of coloured glass began dropping out of the window. The sound of breaking glass grew as more and more pieces poured out of the

window onto the floor like a deafening waterfall. The congregation stood helplessly, watching this disaster, uncertain as to whether the whole church would collapse.

They watched the window until all that remained was the gaunt skeleton of lead strips. Through the opening they could see the ugly backs of the row of houses on Dairy Close. One of them was the Payne's.

They looked back to where Christ had been standing, but saw only a patch of wet stone floor. The rain began to blow in through the empty window and they felt chilled. Their prized Creation Window was now just a litter of broken glass pieces on the floor of the sanctuary.

THE LITTLE BLACK ANGEL

Mick was the youngest angel ever to have applied for a job as guardian of a human soul. I don't know how old he was – in any case angel years are different to ours so it doesn't really matter. But he was at that awkward age when an angel's voice begins to break and so they wouldn't let him sing praises to God with the choir of angels. And his harp was broken. The strings had snapped one day when he was using them to fire little arrows at some of the other junior angels. Some of the elders got very cross with Mick for having ruined his harp but those who had heard him play said it was a mercy!

So, little Mick was bored. If he couldn't praise God with his voice, which was something he really enjoyed, he wanted to go into the Guardians. I suppose you could say that this was the heavenly equivalent of the Boy Scouts. A Guardian is allocated a human soul and pledges to protect it. But unfortunately there were no spare human souls just at the moment. Also he was considered a little young. “Come back, Mick, when you're a bit older,” he was told.

He hated being called Mick. He was named after the archangel Michael but, because he was small for his age, everyone called him Mick. ‘Michael’ is a strong, powerful name, but ‘Mick’ sounds so small.

Why were there no souls for him to care for? Was it because his voice had broken? Or because his name was Mick? Or perhaps it was because he was black!

I expect you've never seen a black angel, even in a picture. You probably can't imagine how dazzling a little black angel can be – none of your dull coal-black. Mick was as shiny black as the sergeant's boots after he's spent two hours spitting and polishing. If you've ever been fortunate to see a gleaming brand new black Rolls Royce sparkling in the sun outside the showroom, you might have a little idea, just a little, of what he was like – so dazzling black that it hurt your eyes just to look at him.

Now you mustn't get the idea that being black he was one of the fallen angels. It's true that he'd fallen quite a number of times as he was learning to fly (he was one of the seraphim and it's hard to coordinate six wings all at once) but he loved God with all his pure heart, even as much as Gabriel himself.

One day he was soaring with a choir of angels high above the Australian outback. He wasn't singing, just listening and twiddling his wings. He happened to notice far below on the hot and dusty plain a four wheel drive vehicle that had broken down. A man was peering under the bonnet while his little boy sat in the shade. After some time (you must remember that time goes quite differently in Heaven so to Mick it was just the next moment) he saw the father wipe his brow and close the bonnet. He then went to his little boy, set him up with the

water bottle and explained that he would have to go off to look for help. And he told the boy to stay with the car. Under no circumstances was he to wander away till help came.

As Mick watched, a day went by – though to him it only seemed like a few seconds. The boy had started to become frightened being there all by himself and so he walked away to look for his dad. As Mick watched the boy over the next few hours Mick saw that he was going in completely the wrong direction. When help came they'd never be able to find him.

Mick flew back into Heaven and tugged at the wing of one of the bigger angels who were still singing and told him about the little boy's plight far below. The big angel whispered back, so as not to disturb the singing, "He's not my responsibility – I'm not *his* guardian angel. Look, when the singing's over we'll try to find which angel is responsible for him. But don't worry! The boy will be O.K. in the meantime."

Now Mick knew what the big angel had forgotten. The few minutes it would take for the praise to finish would be a few days down on earth. Mick knew he had to act quickly. He'd been taught in Angel School how to descend from heaven in glory though he'd never actually tried it before. But he did whatever was necessary and whoosh! The next thing he knew he was walking across the scrub, not far from the little boy.

"Be not afraid," he called out. This was what he'd learned to say in Angel School. But just in case the boy didn't understand he added, "er – don't worry little fella, I won't hurt you".

Mick knew that the boy would be terrified at the sight of a dazzling black angel with six shiny wings and eyes like glowing coals. Which is true, if that's what the little boy saw. But he didn't. You see, angels can also appear as humans and somehow he'd managed to appear in human form. What the little boy saw was a young aboriginal boy holding a boomerang. Far from being afraid the lost boy was relieved to see another human face – well he didn't know that Mick was really an angel, did he?

"Hi! I'm Tim. What's your name," he asked Mick.

Now Mick didn't want to say 'Mick' because it was such a little name, and he daren't say 'Michael' in case the archangel was listening. So he said the first thing that came into his head. "They call me Mickaninni ... but," he added after a pause, "you can call me Mick."

So Mickaninni led Tim back towards the homestead. When they arrived a couple of hours later they saw the search party just starting to set out and of course they were amazed to see them both. What was particularly surprising was the fact that little Tim looked as fresh as if he'd been walking for only a couple of minutes whereas his father had taken three weary days to get there.

Well, with his job completed, Mickaninni found himself back with the heavenly host. The singing soon finished and the big angel leant over to him and said, "Right now, let's go and look for that little boy's guardian angel."

"Oh, there's no need," said Mick, "the boy's been found."

"Oh good. Well there you are, I told you he'd be O.K."

Now despite all he'd done Mick had only been gone for a few minutes and nobody had even noticed that he'd left. Or so he thought.

But the very next day he was summoned into the presence of the Lord God Himself. The brightness was so intense that Mick had to shield his eyes by his own six wings.

"Be not afraid my young Mickaninni," God said with pious mirth, "I see you've acquired the art of throwing the boomerang!"

"I-I-I'm sorry Sir for being absent from the praise service yesterday, but I couldn't let the little boy get lost."

"My young seraph, don't you know that praise doesn't come from the lips. It comes from the heart. And when your heart prompts you to do my will, you praise me as much if you'd sung me a hundred psalms. In as much as you have done it to the least of my children you have done it unto me."

Tim's guardian angel was 'transferred to other duties' and Mickaninni, as he was always called after that, took over. And because Tim was a bit of a handful (you see his mother had died the year before) and he was always getting into trouble, Mickaninni was given special dispensation to stay on the earth full time until Tim grew up.

And that's why, from that day, a little black boy was always seen in the vicinity of the homestead. Nobody knew where he'd come from or which tribe he belonged to. "Must be from the Gunji Gunji up there," said one of the aboriginal stockmen pointing vaguely north. And that's why, as Tim got older and went out riding on his own, he was often seen in the distance in the company of another rider.

The only thing left to tell in this story is the fact that at night when he thought nobody was around, Mickaninni would unfold his six wings and fly across the moon. You see it was important for him to keep in practice. Nobody did ever see him fly, that is, except for the stockman who caught sight of him late one night when he'd had a little too much to drink. And do you know, he hasn't touched a drop since!

AN ANGEL IN HADES

Michael wasn't the best behaved of angels. No way. I mean there was the time he tied the Angel Gabriel's wings behind his back and giggled as he watched him try to fly.

And it was really very naughty to have loosened the strings of Anthony's harp so that when he started playing to the glory of God there came out the most peculiar sounds. Anthony wasn't at all amused. God Himself smiled inwardly, but tried not to show it.

No Michael was a bit of a devil, if you know what I mean. But good? Yes he was a good angel, as good at heart as any angel in Heaven. He was a black angel, black not like coal, but shining black like highly polished ebony.

But Malchior – he was really bad. Although Michael liked him and would often play with him, even Michael had to agree that Malchior could be quite bad when he chose to be, which recently had become very often.

I won't tell you some of the dreadful things that he did. It might give you some bad dreams. It's enough to tell you that his wickedness had come to the attention of God.

Well actually, God had known all along what he'd been up to. God is God after all, and He is all-knowing. But now the time had come for God to have to make a very hard decision. Malchior had to leave Heaven.

Now as it happened Malchior didn't seem to mind much being cast out of heaven.

"I was going to go soon, anyway," he said, "Good riddance to all of you and to this place."

Then he looked at God, pulled a face, and said, "And anyway, I could've made a much better God than you with one wing tied behind my back."

Oh dear, that was one of the dreadful things that I wasn't going to tell you about. Too bad. You now have some idea of how wicked Malchior had become.

Everyone was upset. Not about him having to go – that was inevitable. It was the fact that he had become such a horrid angel that he was even glad to go.

Go where? Oh, yes I forgot to tell you. There really is only one place a fallen angel can go to, and that is, to the Other Place. Now you probably know it by another name that starts with 'H' and rhymes with ... well, I'm not going to use that name. In Heaven they don't use bad language and so they just call it The Other Place or T.O.P. for short.

Now Michael and his young friend Cherry were especially upset because Malchior had been a good friend to them before he went bad. So upset were they in fact that when

Michael suggested to Cherry that they go down to ... well, The Other Place ... to find Malchior, she said, “sure, let’s do it.”

They planned to make him come back. If they could get Malchior to apologise and promise never, never to rebel again, they were sure God would take him back.

So as soon as they had an opportunity, Michael and Cherry slipped away without anyone knowing. Well of course God must have known, He’s all knowing you see, but for some reason He didn’t try to stop them.

I won’t tell you the many adventures they had in finding The Other Place or we’ll never get finished. But eventually they found themselves in ...

“Hello,” Michael called out to a dirty-looking boy sitting in the gutter. “Is this .. The Other Place?”

“Course not stupid. The Other Place must be somewhere else,” he called back rudely.

In fact he was so rude that Michael was sure that indeed he must have been in The Other Place. Though it wasn’t quite what he expected. Like you and I, he had expected lots of fire and brimstone. This place wasn’t like that at all. It was a cold and dreary city with rows and rows of identical, dark and narrow streets.

The houses were crowded together and most of the windows were boarded up – which didn’t matter because there wasn’t much to see. And although it was probably day, you couldn’t be sure, the sky was so dark. There was a heavy pall of smoke blocking out the sun – that’s if there *was* a sun.

The walls of the houses, the streets and even the faces of the inhabitants lounging about were covered in a dirty, greasy substance that seemed to be dripping out of the sky as you watched. A large rat scurried across the pavement and stared at them.

Nor were the inhabitants of this Other Place quite as he had expected. They didn’t have bright red skins, and horns and pointed tails. In fact if you cleaned them up and gave them some wings they might have almost passed for angels – except for their faces.

They didn’t look sad – more like vacant. They gave the impression of not caring about anything. Some were motionless, leaning up against a lamppost or a wall. Others were equally motionless, sitting on a step, or in the gutter.

Those that were moving did so in a slow, repetitive way with absolutely no expressions on their faces. A group of children across the road were throwing a ball backwards and forwards with a total lack of energy and purpose. And the same two children caught the ball each time. The others made only a very half-hearted attempt to intercept it.

A procession of garbage trucks drove noisily down the street emptying the bins. And the funny thing was that even though each bin was emptied it seemed to be full again by the time the next truck came by a few seconds later.

And a little further up the street was a queue of people waiting for a bus. They looked as if they had always been waiting and as if they had no hope of it ever turning up.

“Course not stupid. The Other Place must be somewhere else.” It was the same sullen-faced boy who spoke, just as rudely as before.

“Come on,” said Michael to Cherry as he tugged her little wing, “we’d better move on.”

At that moment the rat, which had been staring at them, scurried off in fright. They turned the corner and entered another street that looked exactly like the one they’d just left. In fact there was a group of children playing exactly the same game as those around the corner and there up the street was another group of people waiting for a bus that would probably never come, and the same looking garbage trucks were busy emptying the bins.

“Course not stupid. The Other Place must be somewhere else.”

Michael looked round and there was another black-faced boy rudely answering a question that Michael hadn’t even asked, not in this street anyway.

This *was* a different street. It must have been because they’d turned the corner. Yet everything was exactly as it had been in that other street. The only difference in fact was that instead of a big black rat staring at him, there was a large black cat. Its eyes showed that it was frightened and although it stood still its muscles were tense, and it was ready to run.

“Come on,” said Michael to Cherry as he tugged her little wing, “we’d better move on.” The black cat ran off in fright as they walked towards the corner.

Turning the corner they now found themselves in yet another street. It was lined with narrow houses with grimy walls and boarded-up windows. And like the two previous streets there were people sitting or standing, not doing anything in particular. And there was a bus queue and the garbage trucks just like before. There were some children playing ball. It was absolutely identical to the other two streets. Only the dog was different. Where there had been a big black cat in the last street there was now a small black dog, just as frightened as the cat had been.

“Course not stupid. The Other Place must be somewhere else.”

“Come on,” said Michael as he tugged Cherry’s little wing, “we’d better move on.”

And the dog ran off in fright as they did.

Now when they had turned the next corner into yet another dreary street, just like the others, Cherry turned to Michael and said, “Why do you keep saying ‘come on, we'd better move on’ in exactly the same way all the time? It frightens me.”

You know how sometimes your mind wanders and you do some stupid little thing over and over, like drumming your fingers on the table until something happens to wake you up out of it. Well that’s exactly what happened to Michael.

It was like waking from a dream. For a moment all he could remember was turning out of one dirty street into another for a whole eternity. But then, slowly, as in a mist, he remembered where he’d come from and why he had come but it was still as if he was under a spell. If he didn’t break out of it in the next few seconds he felt he would spend the rest of eternity acting out those same silly actions and saying “come on” with the same dull voice..

“Course not stupid. The Other Place ...”

But Michael didn’t wait to be insulted yet again by yet another rude and grubby urchin. He ran towards the children, caught their ball and threw it right back to the boy who’d just thrown it.

Then the most amazing thing happened. Everything started going backwards. It was just as if a film in a projector had been run in reverse.

The children continued playing as before but they now ran backwards. The garbage trucks backed down the street one after the other emptying the rubbish back into the bins.

Michael stood there blinking and, as he stood, a big black dog stared at him nervously. It wasn’t the same dog as before – a different breed – much bigger.

And then, before the dog had a chance to move, Michael dived on top of him and pinned him down. “Quick Cherry, help me.”

Cherry was puzzled. Everything that was happening here seemed so strange. She wanted to go home. But she wouldn't be able to find her way back without Michael and he'd started to go all strange as well.

“Why are you trying to catch that stray dog in this awful place?” she asked him.

“Don't just stand there, help me. It’s Malchior!”

Now the dog, whether his name was Malchior or not, didn’t want to go anywhere.

“You see,” everything in this place just goes round in circles ...”

“Course not stupid. The Other Place ...”

“See what I mean? Now what's been the only difference between all these streets?”

Cherry thought hard as best she could while trying to help drag the unwilling dog.

“Well in the first street there was a rat, and ... yes, in the next street there was that frightened cat, and then a dog ...”

“Exactly,” said Michael, “everything that comes to this place eventually becomes a part of the circle and it goes round and round and round and round and round ...”

“Mick.”, she yelled.

Michael snapped out of it. You have to be very careful in this place not to be caught up in incessant repetition.

“The fact that this rat/cat/dog kept changing meant that it hadn't been here very long. I knew then it had to be Malchior.”

“And he was so frightened. The cat, or dog, or Malchior – if it really is him.”

“That was the other thing. Nobody else in this place shows any emotion. But the animals were scared. So whatever power is in this place hadn't got to him yet.”

By this time they had managed to drag the dog back to the previous street.

“Look,” said Cherry, “he's another dog now.”

Being smaller, this dog was much easier to manage. They got him around the corner, being careful not to get run down by the reversing garbage trucks. Around the next corner they found themselves clutching a cat. Though it was smaller than either of the dogs it was much harder to handle. If you've ever tried to carry a cat when it knows it's going to be given a bath, you'll know what I mean.

But being scratched by a struggling cat is nothing to being bitten by a large rat. That's what happened when they got back to the first street.

Now how they got that rat back to Heaven is also another story. Needless to say, somewhere on the way the rat became Malchior. But was he grateful for being rescued? Not a bit of it. He didn't want to go back.

I won't tell you all the horrid names he called them, otherwise you mightn't be able to sleep at night. But they still struggled to bring him back.

Then as they got closer to the Pearly Gates he struggled less and less. And at last he said, "why are you going out of your way to save me. Haven't I caused enough trouble?"

Now you remember that saucepan that you burnt the porridge in that day, where the food burnt and stuck so hard to the bottom that nothing, but nothing, could remove it? You know, that saucepan that Dad said should be thrown out because nothing can ever get it clean again and which Mum soaked for days and Dad said what's the use because the burnt is still stuck as hard as ever to the bottom and he'll buy her a new one anyway?

You remember, that saucepan which after a week of soaking, the black started to soften and Mum scraped hard and eventually got it clean again and Dad said it was hardly worth all that trouble but Mum said it was?

Ah, so you do remember. Well that saucepan was like Malchior. As a result of being soaked by the love of his two friends, the dirt on his soul started to soften and eventually with a lot of hard work it came off. Like the saucepan he didn't have to be thrown out after all.

As they reached the gates of Heaven there was a huge crowd of angels, except with angels you always call them a 'host'.

They were cheering and waving to welcome their return. And God was standing there in the middle, waving as strongly as the rest.

Later, when God spoke to Michael and Cherry He said, "I knew that Malchior's only hope was to have to leave Heaven and be brought back by you and little Miss Bim but I didn't have the right to ask you to go because it was such a risky business. After all you might have so easily got stuck in that Other Place for all of eternity."

"It was a risk worth taking," said Michael smiling at Malchior.

THE RUBBISH FOLK

In the world of fairytales there are many strange kingdoms. I'd like to tell you about one of the strangest of them all, the kingdom of Rubbishstan.

Now what I'm about to tell you is the gospel truth. You see, I lived in Rubbishstan many years ago and I saw these things with my own eyes.

Like all kingdoms, Rubbishstan had a king and he was called King Rubb. Now whether he was called King Rubb because he was the king of Rubbishstan or whether Rubbishstan was called Rubbishstan after King Rubb, nobody ever told me. But what is certain is that those who lived in the kingdom were called the Rubbish Folk.

Oh no, not me, no. I wasn't one of them myself. Sometimes I think I might like to have been a folk of some sort but, you see, I'm a bird.

I hope you won't hold that against me. I'm not a liar bird, you know. I'm not making this up. I know what I saw and I tell you it's the gospel truth.

Now the strange thing about Rubbishstan was that it was completely free of bacteria. Yes, bacteria – you know, those tiny creatures that are so small you can't see them.

But just because you can't see them, that doesn't mean that they aren't there. Oh I can see you don't believe me because I'm only a bird but I swear to you that what I'm saying is really the gospel truth.

Well, as I said, just because you can't see them doesn't mean that they're not there. You can't see the wind but if you're flying into it you know it's real.

But in Rubbishstan it was different. You couldn't see the bacteria because they weren't any.

Now that meant that food never went off. You could keep milk for years and it'd never go sour. Bread never went mouldy. But it had its down side. You see, having no bacteria meant that they could never enjoy yoghurt. Personally I don't know what people see in the stuff – never touch it myself – but some people like it. In Rubbishstan it doesn't exist.

I don't know whether you know this but you can't have yoghurt without bacteria. Oh, I can see you don't believe me but I swear it really is true.

The worst thing about not having any bacteria though, was that you could never get rid of your household rubbish. In your land here you just put the kitchen scraps into the garbage and the rubbish gets carted off to the tip and is buried underground. Then the bacteria get to

work and decompose the waste into good healthy compost. All of this works with the help of those wonderful little creatures you call bacteria.

But in Rubbishstan, with no bacteria, they can't do this. If the kitchen scraps were buried they'd just stay there forever. And being environmentally friendly people, the Rubbish folk had a law that no-one was allowed to throw away any rubbish. You had to carry it around with you all the time!

Well I'm glad to say that this law didn't apply to birds. We're very clean creatures and leave very few scraps but just suppose for a moment I let a grape stalk drop from my beak, well, who'd be there to catch me? But for the Rubbish Folk it was a real burden carrying their accumulated rubbish with them everywhere you went.

The only place you were allowed to get rid of rubbish was inside the Mountain of Doom, an active volcano to the west of Rubbishstan.

In theory you could carry your rubbish there and throw it into the mouth of the volcano and the heat would be so intense that the rubbish would burn up completely as if it was in a giant incinerator.

But the trouble was that it was such a long way off that it would have taken years to get there, even if you didn't have a load of old rubbish to carry along with you.

And the problem was that it took so long to get there that you accumulated so much more rubbish as you went, and that slowed you down even more.

In fact, in the long history of Rubbishstan, though many tried, no one seems to have ever succeeded in getting there. Well, no-one except the king's son. But I'm coming to that. The further they went, the slower they became under increasing amounts of rubbish.

It wasn't that they died before they got there though. Oh no, they weren't allowed to. You see, in Rubbishstan it was against the law to die for any reason. If anyone died then someone else would have to take over the responsibility for their rubbish. In fact the dead body would just be extra rubbish for some poor soul to have to lug around.

So, as they say, Rubbish folk never die – they simply fade away – away towards the Mountain of Doom, getting slower and slower under the increasing weight of their own rubbish.

Flying high over the vast plains that surround the Mountain of Doom you could see a most amusing sight – vast mounds of rubbish, each moving imperceptibly, like so many messy glaciers, towards the volcano. And under each heap of trash was one of the Rubbish folk struggling with their burden.

I can see you don't believe what I'm saying but I assure you it's not one of those tall stories or whatever you people call them – no my story is as short as a sparrow's beak. Anyway, believe me or not I intend to continue.

Well, you see, the good King Rubb wasn't at all happy with this state of affairs. Of course he and his family weren't bothered by it themselves. You see, they were made of different stuff to the ordinary Rubbish citizens. Their food was the sunbeams and they drank the rainbows. There's no waste in that.

But King Rubb wasn't happy about the burden his people had to carry about. In fact he loved his people so much that he sent his only son to live amongst them to see what could be done. I remember the king's son. I used to fly down to the palace gardens and he'd talk to me and I'd sing back to him.

Anyway for several years he taught the people how to cut down on their waste so they'd have less rubbish to carry around. I remember once he came across a young woman who seemed to have accumulated rather more rubbish than was proper for someone so young. She was surrounded by an angry crowd who were about to throw food scraps at her. But the king's son called out to them “let anyone who has no rubbish of his own throw the first scrap”. When they heard that, the crowd melted away for they all carried burdens of rubbish on their own backs.

After some years the king told his son that the only way the problem could ever be solved was for he, the king's son to become the kingdom's garbage man. Yes, you heard me correctly – the king's son was to become a garbo.

Now that wasn't a very nice thing to ask a king's son to do, carrying other folk's rubbish on his back. But the king's son had broad shoulders and, he loved his father so he said, “well, it's not my idea of a career but still let your will be done”.

So he became the kingdom's garbage man. And even though his back was broad and strong he could scarcely move under all that weight.

Now you'd think everyone would be glad for him to take their rubbish off their backs but, do you know, most of the Rubbish folk wouldn't part with their rubbish. Not because it wasn't a fitting thing for a prince to collect garbage. Oh no! They thought that if he wanted to take it from them it must be valuable.

“Get away from me,” they shrieked, “it's *my* rubbish. How dare you try to steal it from me.” But those who accepted his offer danced for joy with the heavy burden having been taken from them.

And as the king's son struggled underneath an enormous pile of rubbish, towards the Mountain of Doom, many of the Rubbish folk called him names and some even spat at him.

“He calls himself the son of the king but look at him,” they jeered, “why he's got more rubbish than any of us.”

But the king's son just continued on towards the volcano. Slowly he hauled the mountain of rubbish up the side of the Mountain of Doom. It was night-time but the flames from the crater lit up the clouds.

Then, as he reached the edge of the crater, with his last bit of strength he managed to tip the rubbish over the side, into the red hot fiery core of the volcano. But then a terrible thing happened. Having no strength left to keep his balance, he toppled over, and followed the rubbish, down into the depths of the volcano.

Suddenly the sky became dark. The vast amounts of rubbish pouring down into the crater had completely blanketed the red hot flames.

I saw it all happen and I couldn't believe it could end like this. So I landed in a tree at the foot of the volcano and watched. For three days the volcano seemed dead, and there was no sign of the king's son.

But on the third day, as the sun's rays came up over the horizon, I did as I had done every few hours, I flew over the volcano and looked down into the crater. This time, from one corner of the black depths I saw a faint glow.

Soon it grew brighter and brighter. Then I began to feel the heat so I had to circle higher. The light was whiter and purer than it had been before. It soon grew so bright I had to cover my eyes with my wings, which made flying very difficult I can tell you! I decided to look again, just for an instant and, I know you won't believe me, I saw the king's son rising up out of the brightness. At least he looked like I remembered him but his body shone.

He climbed out of the crater and started walking down the mountain-side. I flew up to him, overjoyed to see him and I was going to land on his head as I had done before many times in the palace gardens but he said, “don't touch me – I have not yet returned to my father.”

So I flew beside him and sang – my heart was so full of joy. “Isn't it wonderful that it's all over,” I chirped.

“Over ?” he said. “So you think it's all over, my little one. It's many days since I was last in Rubbishstan. Don't you think that more rubbish will have accumulated while I've been away? I must go back for more.”

I couldn't believe it! The king's son was going to start it all over again. He'd never finish his task. He would be struggling under the weight of rubbish that was not his own for all eternity. Oh how he must have loved his people.

I know that you can't believe it either. I'm only a bird and nobody ever believes a bird. But perhaps after hearing my story, perhaps deep down inside your heart there's a faint glow of belief.

But on the other hand you probably don't even believe that birds can talk!

IN RUMBLES CAFÉ

SCENE: *A café.*

DAVE: Mind if I sit down here?

ALEX (*writing*): That's fine – it's busy here at the Lakeside Café this morning.

DAVE: I hope I'm not interrupting your work.

ALEX: No, it's fine. It's not exactly work – I'm writing a few ideas about how long it takes for someone to feel they belong somewhere.

DAVE: That's an interesting subject. Is that what you are interested in?

ALEX: Yes, although there is a particular reason. There are quite a few new people coming to my church and I'm thinking about some of the ways they can feel they belong.

DAVE: You have your own Church?

ALEX: No I mean the Church I go to.

DAVE: Which Church is that?

ALEX: Oh, I go along to Eastwood Uniting Church up the road there on the corner.

DAVE: So do I. I like the morning service very much. Always something interesting happening. I don't recall seeing you there. But, there again, I'm quite new. I've only been going there for about six months.

ALEX: Well, you won't see me in the morning. I go along in the evening – to One Heart. That's my type of church.

DAVE: Oh, that explains why I've never seen you there. You know, I've always thought it funny that they call it church, like Eastwood Uniting *Church*, when "church" refers to just the building. We should call ourselves by a name that refers to the people. What do you think is the best collective name for a group of people who go along to church, a group of worshippers – you know, like a pride of lions or a herd of elephants?

ALEX: Good question. Well, I've always thought that "faith community" works well.

DAVE: Naw, I don't like that.

ALEX: Why not?

DAVE: It makes me think of those way-out religious communes in America. Slightly strange and wacky groups.

ALEX: I rather like the word “community”? For me it captures the fact that we have something in common with one another, that we share a common purpose. And putting “faith” in front defines and explains what it is we have in common, that is our faith.

DAVE: Yes, but it seems too weak a word for my liking. I live in the community of Eastwood, but I don’t feel I share a common purpose with my neighbours. I think I’d prefer “family”. It’s much closer. I mean ... if my neighbour was on a kidney machine I might volunteer to mow his lawn for him, but I doubt if I’d donate a kidney to him! But for a close family member, I might. You see, “family” is much closer than “community”.

ALEX: Yes, but I have a lot of difficulty with the word “family”. When our extended family gets together for a special event like a wedding or at Christmas it’s like you need to have a degree in walking on eggshells. Mention ‘family’ and I immediately think about my uncle Neville – he has the capacity to start a fight with anyone at the drop of a hat.

DAVE: Yes, I have an aunt who’s a bit like that. Everyone in my family wonders who she takes after. The general consensus is that she must have been switched at the hospital. She’s a nightmare.

ALEX: And also, while some people have very happy families, other people may not have a family at all, and so talking about the church as a family might be very painful for them.

DAVE: But that’s why Church family is good. It means that no matter what our biological families are like we have a church family. You wouldn’t want to deny people that would you?

ALEX: But I still reckon that ‘family’ can be a word that can exclude people. If you come from a happy family then it may not be so obvious. But if mention of family reminds you straightaway of abuse, or violence, or something else profoundly negative and painful it’s not such a good word for a church. It brings up all those memories and emotions.

DAVE: But it’s good to speak about people in a church being brothers and sisters.

ALEX: True but I still reckon that there are issues with calling a church a family

DAVE: Yes, I suppose you’re right. I tell you what though. Some years ago I went along to the Salvation army. They seem very comfortable and happy with the word “army”. That’s a nice strong word. Much stronger than ‘community’ – “Salvation Army”. It suggests a common purpose. And action. Everyone in an army has an active role.

ALEX: Oh no! Next you'll be suggesting we sing "Onward Christian Soldiers". It might have been a good name once, in its own way, but for me it's totally inappropriate in today's world. We've seen too many bad things done by armies. There was a time when much of the church language was about fighting, about taking on the enemy. I was never comfortable with that in the context of Jesus being the prince of peace. No, I don't like 'army' at all.

DAVE: Fair enough. Speaking of Jesus, what about 'flock'. Jesus used that metaphor. "I am the Good Shepherd." Couldn't we call ourselves a 'flock of faith'?

ALEX: That's a good one. I rather like that. A faith flock. Mind you everyone in church would have to look a little sheep-ish. The minister could count out his flock as they followed one another into church. Instead of people falling asleep during a sermon the minister might fall asleep counting sheep.

DAVE: Very droll!

ALEX: And if the minister was a good shepherd he or she could listen to the voice, or the bleating, of each sheep. Everyone would have a baa code that could be scanned as they came into church. Do you like that? Baa code – to see if perhaps one was missing he'd just have to scan their baa codes!

DAVE: I'm trying to be serious.

ALEX: So am I. But at the end of the day does it matter anyway. You prefer 'family', I prefer 'community'. You say 'tomayto', and I say 'tomarto'. No that doesn't work. That wasn't what I meant. As long as we all know what we mean it doesn't matter what word we use. We simply pick one that works for each of us.

DAVE: No, I think it *does* matter. Names *are* important. They can change our attitudes to things.

ALEX: OK – give me some examples. My family – that's my biological family, not my church family, had a phrase about names – "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." Is that relevant?

DAVE: A bit, although I think you're wrong. What you call something is very important. For example, I don't know what your views are on gay marriage but for homosexual couples the word marriage is more important to them than 'civil union', even if 'civil union' gives them the same rights as marriage.

ALEX: What's that got to do with what we call a church?

DAVE: Well, the name 'Methodist' was a term of derision thrown at the early Wesleyans until they adopted it to describe themselves.

ALEX: OK, I understand that. Like the Quakers didn't call themselves that to begin with. It started out as a joke when people saw them shaking with their fervent prayer. And now the Quakers wear the name with pride. I suppose you're right. Perhaps names *are* important after all.

DAVE: I don't see what's wrong with calling ourselves a family. After all, when we pray the Lord's Prayer we say "Our Father". Doesn't that make us a family?

ALEX: Not at all. That's language about God that comes from a patriarchal society. If Jesus were around today, in real, if you know what I mean, I reckon he would use more inclusive language, like 'parent', or that God is like a loving mother and father.

DAVE: That's a bit of speculation – Jesus being so politically correct. So you've knocked down 'army' and 'family'. Apart from your 'community' have you got an alternative?

ALEX: I rather like 'household'?

DAVE: I read somewhere that in the time of Jesus the word 'father' meant 'head of the household', more than just a biological thing. Apparently it was fairly normal for people to marry quite young in those days and it was not at all unusual for a boy to become a father at the age of 16. We know that Mary was only 15 when the angel came to her. I bet Joseph was not that much older. So when a boy became a father he would still be living in the household of his own father.

ALEX: That's all very interesting, I didn't know that.

DAVE: But Joseph and Mary didn't live with their parents, as far as we know. I've just had a thought – it's a curious thing that we never hear of Jesus's grandparents.

ALEX: I'm sure that one of them gets a mention in a family tree somewhere – is it at the beginning of Matthew? I'm sure that was a question at a trivia night I went to once at Hillsong. That's interesting, they don't use church do they?

DAVE: You've digressed. You were speaking about household.

ALEX: Yes, that's right. Anyway, the word 'household' for me captures a lot of what I think the word 'family' does for you, only it's more inclusive. When I was growing up most households in our street were a Mum and a Dad and a couple of kids, what they call nowadays a nuclear family. These days household can be single people, couples simply living together; a household can be a group of uni students, or a gay couple, or a daughter and her old mother, simply the people who live in that particular building, just like a church household is comprised of the people who go along to that particular church.

DAVE: Household of faith. Yes, I could get used to that. But whatever happened to “congregation”. When I was a Sunday School kid it was simple. We were a ‘congregation’ that worshipped in a ‘church’. We had none of these fancy phrases that seem to be floating about today. The world seems to want to invent fancy names for things that had perfectly good ordinary names. I mean we used to have garbos, and now we have refuse collectors.

ALEX: Times change, and we realise that the world is more diverse. Sometimes when I tell people I live with a doctor people assume that I am gay. People often assume that doctors are male. We have to be careful that the way we speak avoids stereotypes.

DAVE: I guess so. We need to be careful about that. And sometimes using a new name for something makes us think about what assumptions we carry around with us. And also what the name means. I must admit I took a long time getting used to saying new words in the Lord’s Prayer.

ALEX: Like saying ‘sins’ instead of ‘trespasses’.

DAVE: Yes, and like ‘save us from the time of trial’ instead of ‘lead us not into temptation’.

ALEX: I think the changes are good. The language is more relevant, easier to understand. Trespassing always used to remind me of the sign near the apple orchard on my way home from school, or the sign near the railway line.

DAVE: That one’s actually still there!

ALEX: Yes, the changes certainly made me think more about the words. And that’s really my point about what we call a church. Sometimes one word, whether it be a congregation or a flock is rather limiting.

DAVE: I wonder what church was called right at the beginning.

ALEX: What, you mean the first time it gets mentioned in the Bible or something?

DAVE: Yes , do you know?

ALEX: I think so. It is a word like ‘ekklesia’ from which we get ecclesiastic I suppose.

DAVE: Do you know what it means?

ALEX: The ‘ek’ bit is a prefix I think, and is Greek for ‘out’. The other part of the word I think has something to do with being called, so ekklesia is being called out. Like someone going around calling people out of their individual homes into a gathering. ‘Eastwood Ekklesia’ has a good ring to it!

DAVE: But it's no good using a word that no-one else understands – even if it *is* a biblical word.

ALEX: True enough. Gee it's tricky coming up with one word that works for everyone isn't it?

DAVE: Well, maybe we should not stick with just one name for who we are, worshipping in the Eastwood Uniting Worship Centre. If we had a variety of words or phrases we might think about who we believe we are a bit more deeply, and how we relate to one another.

ALEX: But a lot of new churches that are springing up around the place don't even have church in their name.

DAVE: Yes, one church I went to was the Church of Unity and One Mind.

ALEX: I suppose their favourite hymn is that old one with the words 'e'en now we think and speak the same'?

DAVE: It was, but whoever wrote that never went to any of their church council meetings.

ALEX: Not a good example of unity and one mind, then.

DAVE: Unfortunately not. Always ended in a massive argument.

ALEX: Mind you, in any human community you don't realistically expect people to be in 'perfect harmony'. I think a certain amount of controversy is a healthy thing for a faith community.

DAVE: Or a 'family in Christ'. Or a 'household of faith'. Do you think we should ask if they can change the name of our church to 'Eastwood Uniting Household of Faith'?

ALEX: We'd need a longer sign.

DAVE: Perhaps we should stick to what we've got. But we need to remind ourselves that we are a congregation, not simply an *audience* in church. We interact.

ALEX: Absolutely. A church is people.

DAVE: You know I used to be very self-conscious about the 'passing of the peace' in church but now I've got used to it.

ALEX: Do you do that in the morning service? They do it in the evening. It's OK, but I feel a bit awkward still. I'm rather shy and introvert, but I get the concept behind it.

DAVE: I used to like it when I went to a church and we went up in small groups and knelt at a communion rail. As I sat in my pew I'd think about the dozen people who were kneeling out in front and felt a part of them.

ALEX: Is that why so many people want to sit up the back? So they can see who's there and so they can pray for them?

DAVE: Don't know. Maybe there are lots of reasons people sit at the back. Anyway, I'd offer up a little prayer for some of them as they knelt at the communion rail, especially if I knew their problems. As it is I often don't see some of the people who sit behind me and who skip morning tea.

ALEX: That sounds a bit weird. I'm not sure what a communion rail is, but what we do in the evening is we all have communion together. There's that word again, 'communion' must be linked with 'community'. We get to eat and drink together so there's more opportunity to feel more like a community, or a household, oh, all right, a family.

DAVE: We just have morning tea. It's OK, but you know what. Since we've started having the community morning tea – and here I'm using the word in the sense of the Eastwood community – I find it easier to talk to our own people in greater depth than with ordinary morning teas. I don't quite know what makes it different. Perhaps it's the location. Perhaps one feels like staying longer. Quite apart from the outreach possibilities I feel it's been a wonderful new idea to promote a feeling of oneness among our own people.

ALEX: So we're a community of faith ...

DAVE: ... and a family in Christ ...

ALEX: ... and even a congregation ...

DAVE: ... and an army in the service of God ...

ALEX: I'm still not too comfortable about calling ourselves an 'army'.

DAVE: We're a unique collection of people – with many different views but a common purpose. There is no other group of people quite like it. I suppose that's why we have so much trouble in finding the right phrase.

ALEX: I agree that names are important, but we needn't use just one name or phrase.

DAVE: You're right. The important word is 'belong'. Whatever it is we belong to – a flock or a family or a fellowship ...

ALEX: ... or a community or a congregation – we *belong!*

AT THE *SHEEP AND GOATS* PUB

SCENE: *A bar in a pub*

BILLY: You seen the paper this morning, Vic?

VICTOR: No, mate, why?

BILLY: Your lot have made it onto the front page?

VICTOR: My lot? What do you mean?

BILLY: The church you go to.

VICTOR: (*shocked*) my Uniting Church is on the front page of the Daily Standard?

BILLY: No, not *your* Uniting Church. The Uniting Church – all of it.

VICTOR: Yes, we expected that. It's because there was the Assembly, a national meeting last week.

BILLY: You lot really get stuck into contemporary issues.

VICTOR: Yes, it's part of our DNA. We're a made up of people with very diverse views. That's what I like about it.

BILLY: Yes, but it must make it very hard when, as the paper says, there are strong differences of opinion. It looks like people in your church aren't sure what to believe.

VICTOR: That's not a problem for me.

BILLY: Why not?

VICTOR: Well, I've found that, over the years, my beliefs have changed.

BILLY: What????!!! I find that hard to.....believe. I always thought that you are a person with very strong beliefs.

VICTOR: That might be how you see me, but the truth is that beliefs are often locked into a particular context.

BILLY: What do you mean?

VICTOR: Well, as an example, for about 1600 years the belief was that the sun went around the earth. Galileo's proposition was that the earth went around the sun.

BILLY: Interesting ... it's the old 'Galileo's heliocentric idea'. Carry on chief.

VICTOR: Thanks Bill. Indeed. Galileo was met with opposition within the Catholic Church, and in 1616 the Inquisition declared heliocentrism to be formally heretical. The Roman Inquisition tried Galileo in 1633 and found him 'vehemently suspect of heresy', sentencing him to indefinite imprisonment. Galileo was kept under house arrest until his death in 1642.

BILLY: And your point is?

VICTOR: That beliefs are contextual. If I'd been alive before Galileo I probably would have believed that the sun went around the earth, because that was what was taught. Now I believe differently because I live in a different context.

BILLY: That's interesting. I guess there would be quite a few things like that.

VICTOR: Yes. I might have lived in a time when I would have believed that the world was flat, or ...

BILLY: ... or that the human race wasn't created as we are now, but evolved.

VICTOR: That's an interesting one. There are some people in our church who sincerely believe that the universe and living organisms originate from specific acts of divine creation, as in the biblical account. What do you believe?

BILLY: With my science background I'm convinced by natural processes such as evolution. But I still find it tricky, because of what's in the Bible. I'm comfortable believing that God created evolution.

VICTOR: I would imagine there are many people who believe certain things because of what's in the Bible, or what they were taught at some point. And people can end up believing in creationism or evolution, or, as you do, in both!!!

BILLY: What about other beliefs that have changed? Do you think that if you'd lived at a different time you might have believed it was OK for people to have slaves, or not appropriate to give women the vote in elections?

VICTOR: I think I would have been against slaves.

BILLY: And giving women the vote?

VICTOR: I'm not sure. I would like to think that I would have supported the right for women to vote.

BILLY: Even if your church believed differently?

VICTOR: Yes.

BILLY: Why?

VICTOR: That issue is not so much about beliefs, but about values.

BILLY: What's the difference?

VICTOR: I guess that beliefs are about context. If you live at a time when people such as teachers, the church, and so on believe the earth is flat, or that the sun goes around the earth, you believe that until it is proved otherwise.

BILLY: Except for the people who belong to the flat earth society!

VICTOR: Yes. So beliefs change. I would say that values apply universally, all the time, regardless of context.

BILLY: So how does that apply with giving women the vote?

VICTOR: Well, if I have a belief, say, that all people are created equal by God, which is in the Bible, then a value that is consistent with my belief is the value of equality. I would like to think that the value of equality is universal.

BILLY: That sounds lovely in theory, but how does that work in practice?

VICTOR: Some years ago, our Church, which has a value of equality, made a decision that all people, regardless of their gender, could express a call to become ministers. It was consistent with, and flowed from, a belief that God creates, and loves, all people equally.

BILLY: Where previously the belief was ordaining men only?

VICTOR: Exactly

BILLY: But doesn't the Bible teach that women are not to speak in church?

VICTOR: Well ...yes ... at one point.

BILLY: So, according to the Bible, it's wrong to ordain women.

VICTOR: There would be some who might argue that. And whilst I might disagree with them, I respect that they have their fixed beliefs, sincerely and strongly held.

BILLY: But you have a different belief?

VICTOR: As I said, that particular belief needs to be seen in context. When we look closely at Jesus and his teaching, we discover that he teaches values. And one clear value is his teaching about equality.

BILLY: So you go against the biblical teaching at that point?

VICTOR: Interpreting the Bible needs to be guided by the Holy Spirit. If our belief leads to holding equality as a value, then it is appropriate to try to live out equality.

BILLY: It's a slippery slope Vic. Also, in the paper it says that the Uniting Church discussed the issue of euthanasia, or what they call ... voluntary assisted dying.

VICTOR: Yes, that's another 'hot potato'. There was a letter in the Sydney Morning Herald last week from a 91 year old, advocating very coherently for voluntary assisted dying.

BILLY: I saw that, too. The writer was reflecting on how many things had changed during his lifetime.

VICTOR: So what do you believe?

BILLY: I believe it is wrong

VICTOR: Why?

BILLY: Well, I believe that life is sacred, and when we start making decisions to end our lives, it's not our choice.

VICTOR: What about people who are compos mentis, and in such terrible pain and agony?

BILLY: That's sad to see, but that's life, so to speak. What about you?

VICTOR: I'm still wrestling with that one. I believe, like you, about the sacredness of life. But I also want to live out values such as compassion. I want to be compassionate towards other people, and, from a compassionate perspective, if certain protocols are in place, voluntary assisted dying might become an example of a universal value taking precedence over a contextual belief.

BILLY: That could well pass the pub test; I see what you mean. I remember, years ago, being in the palliative hospital where my great aunt was very ill, and in huge pain. I

remember the minister from her church came to visit her, and he – remember the church I attend doesn't have female ministers – spoke to her about illness being 'the cross she had to bear'. Now you mention it, what he said to her was all about beliefs.

VICTOR: I come across many older people who question where God is as they get more frail. In fact, I've come across a few older people who pray that God will take them during the night because they don't have the will to live any more.

BILLY: Really?

VICTOR: Yes. And, years ago, they believed that it was wrong to have doubts.

BILLY: They were taught that having doubts is a sign of a lack of faith?

VICTOR: Exactly.

BILLY: And now?

VICTOR: I guess the value they live by is honesty. If we are wanting to be in a healthy spiritual relationship, then honesty in that relationship is a core value.

BILLY: So it's OK to have doubts and ask questions?

VICTOR: Absolutely.

BILLY: But surely beliefs are more important than values?

VICTOR: I'm not sure about that. There are some 'beliefs' that are non-negotiable for me. What beliefs are non-negotiable for you?

BILLY: Which suggest that there may be some that are negotiable.

VICTOR: Yes, for me, that's right. In the church we occasionally say a creed that says Jesus was born of the virgin Mary.

BILLY: That's an important part of Christian belief.

VICTOR: In the sense that it has been believed and taught, and people believe the virgin birth to be true, although there's no actual proof or evidence.

BILLY: I would suggest that the resurrection of Jesus is in that can't be proven category too. Is that also a negotiable?

VICTOR: For me the difference is that the belief in the virgin birth was developed to fit an Old Testament quote, and that many ‘gods on earth’ had supernatural births. The resurrection has far more ‘evidence’, as far as I am concerned. People experienced Jesus in various ways after he had died. That to me is very clear.

BILLY: But surely you can’t pick and choose which bits to believe and which bits not to believe? That’s like creating your own religion. I can see another slippery slope about all this.

VICTOR: That’s a fair point. What I am wanting to say is that I build my life around beliefs, but those beliefs constantly have to be evaluated in their context, with help from the Holy Spirit. And the key for me is looking very closely at the way Jesus lived, and what he teaches. I would suggest that much of the time Jesus teaches values.

BILLY: But surely he wanted people to believe in God?

VICTOR: Many of His audience did believe in God. But Jesus wanted to show them the heart of God. Many of his audience were living a way they thought that God wanted, by keeping laws, like the 10 commandments. and making sacrifices. That’s what they believed.
(Pause)

BILLY: Where does it say that Jesus was teaching something different?

VICTOR: Well, there’s the time when Jesus’ disciples were walking through some grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, so they began breaking off some heads of grain and eating them. Jesus was criticised for allowing his disciples to eat on a Sabbath, but Jesus speaks about God wanting compassion not sacrifice.

BILLY: OK. Fair enough.

VICTOR: Billy, tell me about a parable Jesus tells.

BILLY: Ooh, I don’t know ... what about the parable of the good Samaritan.

VICTOR: An excellent choice. Do you remember the context?

BILLY: Yes. Jesus has been teaching people to love God and their neighbour.

VICTOR: Core value of Jesus – love. Sorry, I interrupted, carry on.

BILLY: And someone, was it a lawyer, asked “Who is my neighbour?”

VICTOR: And what is an important message in that parable?

BILLY: That we are to show compassion, to help people, and not walk past on the other side.

VICTOR: And in the parable, who was the person who lived that way? Who showed values of love, compassion and generosity?

BILLY: The Samaritan.

VICTOR: Yes, a hated foreigner.

BILLY: Oh I see. You are saying that at the time of Jesus the Jewish people believed that they were God's chosen people, and Jesus challenges that belief.

VICTOR: Yes. And He teaches about the kingdom of God, which is value-driven. But those values flow from the belief that Jesus is the son of God.

BILLY: The kingdom of God ... ?

VICTOR: That's right. Jesus teaches about forgiveness rather than seeking revenge. Or about loving enemies. These are not beliefs, they are values.

BILLY: I get that. I understand how your beliefs lead to your values.

VICTOR: My understanding of Jesus is that he teaches the values that are to be the ways we behave, and ways we treat other people. Together, our beliefs and values will shape and determine our attitudes and opinions.

BILLY: Still, it does make it hard for your mob when you are on the front page.

VICTOR: I don't see that as a bad thing. It says to the wider community that an important value for many people in the Uniting Church is justice or fairness. And so people in the Uniting Church will not only speak up about perceived injustice, but will actively pursue justice.

BILLY: Is that why some are agitating for action about refugees and asylum seekers?

VICTOR: Precisely. If your understanding of Jesus is that he welcomes all people, that he has compassion for the vulnerable and the marginalised, it is natural, logical even, to be actively pursuing fairness and justice.

BILLY: And what about all this stuff about saying sorry for things that happened years ago in the church?

VICTOR: Again, many people might see reconciliation as a value that Jesus teaches, lives out. And where the church has not lived out being welcoming and inclusive in the past, it is important to seek reconciliation.

BILLY: Inclusive – you’ve mentioned that quite a lot, Vic.

VICTOR: Because it’s an important value to me, and it’s one of the values that my Uniting Church emphasises. Our minister often bangs on about how God loves all people regardless of any differences. And many people struggle with that.

BILLY: Why? What do they believe?

VICTOR: It’s hard to say. Some people believe that they are inclusive, but still struggle to accept people of different religions or different ethnic background or different sexual orientation.

BILLY: Doesn’t that depress you?

VICTOR: No, the church has been, and always will be, a work in progress. As I said, people’s beliefs may change over time. What’s important for me are the values that are universal. They are what will bring about more of the kingdom of God on earth.

BILLY: Ah, the kingdom of God on earth again. What would this earth look like if we lived with the values Jesus teaches and lives out? I think I see what you mean. It’s about living life with God’s values.

VICTOR: And there will be people in the church who are very belief-driven. Diversity seems to have been a core value in the Christian Church for 2000 years.

BILLY: Well, Vic, I really value your friendship, and whilst I don’t believe everything you’ve said is right, and some of what you say sounds very wishy-washy, I do value the way you make me think about my beliefs.

VICTOR: And I believe ... it’s your shout.

BILLY: In the interests of friendship and fairness. Same again?

VICTOR: Of course! Some things never change.

AT THE FOOTY

SCENE: *Fred and Jake are sitting side by side at a football oval, holding beer cans and waiting for the game to start.*

JAKE: Good crowd here for the game.

FRED: I always like the pre-game build up.

JAKE: Look – they’re starting a Mexican wave.

FRED: Well Jake, who do you think is going to win tonight?

JAKE: As you know Fred, I’m barracking for the Spiders. I had a look on their website, and they’re putting out a strong team tonight. They’re bound to eat up the Flies.

FRED: But don’t forget that the Flies beat the Wombats last week – it was 4 goals to 1. I think they’re in good form. Their play down the wings was terrific.

JAKE: I must admit they did surprisingly well. That last goal was pretty amazing.

FRED: Ah, but nothing like the Argentinian Jack Silvero in the World Cup last month. Remember that goal that clinched the match. He was half-way down the pitch, facing away from the goal, when he kicked it behind him and it went high into the air.

JAKE: Oh, yes I remember. I thought it was going to go right over the net, but it bounced, clipped the underside of the bar, and rolled into the goal. There’s no way the goalkeeper could have stopped it.

FRED: Yes, I’ve never seen anything like it. I call it a blinking miracle.

JAKE: Funny you should say that. I’ve been thinking about miracles recently. You go to church, Fred. Do you believe in all those miracles in the Bible?

FRED: Which ones did you have in mind?

JAKE: Well, what about the one the Catholics go on about – the one where Mary was a virgin but she gave birth to Jesus. You’ve got to admit that’s pretty unbelievable.

FRED: It’s not just Catholics that affirm the Virgin Birth. It’s in the Apostles Creed.

JAKE: Whatever. Well, how do you explain it? I mean a virgin birth is biologically impossible.

FRED: I must admit that some of the miracles in the Bible are hard to explain in the light of modern science. Many Christians believe that they're symbolic stories, and are not meant to be literally true. But the Virgin Birth is interesting. I mean there are some species where virgin birth is the normal way of doing business.

JAKE: Go on, you're pulling my leg!

FRED: No, it's true. There are some species of lizards where females give birth without the need for a male lizard. It goes by some fancy name – that sounds like the Parthenon.

JAKE: Just a moment – I'll Google it.

He spends a moment with his smart phone.

JAKE: Yes, you're right. It's called Parthen-o-genesis.

FRED: So, if it happens all the time with lizards I can't see why it can't sometimes occur spontaneously with humans.

JAKE: But really! Apart from the Mary of Biblical times, have you ever heard of it happening in more modern times?

FRED: I'm not saying it does. But I wouldn't rule it out. I mean all sorts of weird and wonderful things happen in biology, even human biology. You get babies with two heads, and some people can hear colours. We had a sermon about that in our church not so long ago. There was a word for that. Synesthesia. You can learn a lot in church these days!

JAKE: But these are well documented. They might be rare but we have proof that they do happen.

FRED: But just suppose that one in a billion births are virgin births. That would mean one such occurrence every 20 years. Now imagine the poor woman – a virgin mother – trying to explain it. “No, honestly, I haven't been with a man.” “Oh, yes, pull the other leg. Of course you must have been.” No such virgin mother would ever be believed. Imagine the embarrassment that Joseph felt. At least he believed that Mary was telling the truth which is something amazing.

JAKE: If it could be proved that she wasn't a virgin, would that shatter your faith?

FRED: No, I don't see why it would. I mean Jesus has done so much in my life. What difference would it make if I was forced to admit that he was born out of wedlock?

JAKE: Well, wasn't he?

FRED: You know what I mean. If Mary wasn't a virgin it would only make Jesus seem more human in my eyes.

JAKE: You know what I think is odd. The Bible goes to great lengths to trace the ancestry of Jesus back to King David, through Joseph, and then it tells us that Joseph had nothing to do with it biologically.

FRED: Yeh, I never could understand that.

JAKE: Here's the meat pie seller. Do you want me to get you one?

FRED: That'd be great.

JAKE: Two pies, with sauce, please.

FRED: I bet if Jesus was here, the poor pie seller would go out of business.

JAKE: Why is that?

FRED: Well, he'd take five pies and make them go round the entire stadium.

JAKE: And there'd be dozens of bins of food left over. How do you explain the feeding of the five thousand?

FRED: Some people have said that many people had lots of food while many others had nothing. The have's didn't want to share with the have nots. And the generosity of the boy, and the charisma of Jesus, opened up their hearts.

JAKE: But why would Jesus do this? Why should those who were organised enough to bring food have to share with those short-sighted people who brought nothing? I mean the five wise virgins didn't share with the foolish ones!

FRED: Oh, that was just a story to illustrate a point. You can't take it literally.

JAKE: And you don't think that the Feeding of the Five Thousand wasn't just a story to make a point?

FRED: Well the Bible's usually pretty careful in distinguishing between an actual event and a story. Luke refers to the nearest town – Bethsaida I think. When it's just a parable the place is referred to merely as a "certain place". I'm certain that the thing took place but I don't know whether to interpret it literally.

JAKE: I mean how could five loaves and two fish make up so many baskets of scraps, even if the people only ate a crumb of bread like you lot do in communion. It defies the law of conservation of matter.

FRED: Don't forget who created that law! But to me it isn't really that important.

JAKE: Well, why did Jesus perform any miracles at all?

FRED: To help people believe, I guess.

JAKE: But he showed that he preferred it when people believed without needing a miracle to convince them. Tell me Fred, what do you think is the most amazing miracle in the whole Bible?

FRED: Without a doubt it's the one right at the very beginning. The whole Universe was created out of nothing.

JAKE: That's not what science says.

FRED: The big bang theory says that it all started from a tiny point, which is practically the same thing.

JAKE: I suppose.

FRED: And the wonderful diversity of Nature. They used to say that you could prove that God exists by looking at Nature. Then this idea went out of fashion.

JAKE: That's because we found out about Evolution – the way complex things can grow out of simple ones. Natural selection has done it, not God. Or are you one of those creationists who believe that God waved a little finger and it all came into existence in 4004 BC?

FRED: Oh, no. I believe that it has taken many millions of years and, yes, natural selection has a lot to do with it. But I respect a God who thought of carrying out creation in this remarkable way than if he'd been merely a cosmic magician.

JAKE: Look the players are coming out onto the field.

FRED: Yes, just a couple more minutes to kick-off.

JAKE: I hope the Spiders start well today. Last week they were awful in the first half, and I thought they were going to get killed. Going behind so early, the fact that they won made it feel like they'd snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, it was like they'd come back from the dead.

FRED: Good analogy, Jake. You make it sound like Jesus and his death and resurrection.

JAKE: Well what about the Resurrection? I suppose you're going to tell me that it is quite normal for dead people to come alive again. Is it like the Virgin Birth perhaps? Dead people do come alive but it's a very rare event and nobody would believe it. Or was He just in some catatonic trance and only *seemed* to be dead? I suppose you're going to tell me that it's not important to your faith whether it was true or false.

FRED: No, the Resurrection is central to my faith but I'm not sure how it was done. It's a deep mystery. But I do know that Jesus is alive through my experience of Him.

JAKE: But it's quite unscientific.

FRED: I don't have a clear answer. There's something about the risen Christ. He went to a lot of trouble to show He wasn't just an apparition. But His risen body was different. He could appear in locked rooms. He ate a fish. I wonder if there's a reality that's neither ghostly nor material as we know it. And remember that He told Mary not to touch Him because He hadn't yet risen. In fact I don't think anybody touched Him.

JAKE: Thomas did.

FRED: No, he said he wouldn't believe unless he put his hands into Jesus' side. But when he was with the other disciples a week later he said he didn't have to touch Jesus in order to believe it was really Him.

JAKE: Maybe the one who was there wasn't Thomas. It could have been his twin brother. Remember Thomas was an identical twin. That's why they called him Didymus – it means twin.

FRED: Then what did they call his twin brother?

JAKE: Perhaps it was Jeremiah, and they called the twins Tom and Jerry. They might have played cat and mouse growing up.

JAKE: Quiet! The whistle is about to go. Come on you Spiders!

ON EASTWOOD STATION

SCENE: *A railway station.*

CARL: Oh hi, Neil. Haven't seen you for a while.

NEIL: No, but it's good to see you. I'm waiting for the all stations – what about you?

CARL: Same. I'm going into Town Hall. *(Pause)* What's that you're reading?

NEIL: Oh, it's just the Bible. I'm using this time to catch up on my Bible study.

CARL: Wow. Bibles these days don't look like Bibles used to. It's got a fancy cover. I thought it might have been one of Dan Brown's latest novels. You know we Christians are lucky to have the Bible.

NEIL: Why lucky?

CARL: Well, it takes the uncertainty out of our faith. You know what's true and what's false and how to live as a Christian just by reading God's word.

NEIL: But it's not always easy to interpret.

CARL: Oh, no. You don't have to interpret it. It's God's inspired word. You just take it at face value.

NEIL: You mean read it literally?

CARL: Of course. *(Pause)*

NEIL: So you believe that the world was created in just 144 hours?

CARL: You mean the six days of creation? Well, maybe that's not supposed to be literal days. A day is as a thousand years ... or a thousand million years. It's a God day, that's what I mean.

NEIL: So there you are. It says 'six days' but you are interpreting it as six ages.

CARL: I suppose so, but you have to be very careful in interpreting things. After all, if you allow too much interpretation you can make the Bible say anything you like. *(Pause)*

NEIL: What about miracles?

CARL: What about them? Biblical miracles or State Rail managing to get the trains on time?

NEIL: I mean things in the Bible. Take something from the Old Testament for example. Do you really believe that the sun stood still in Joshua's time?

CARL: Why not?

NEIL: Because it's a physical impossibility. The sun's apparent movement is caused by the earth's rotation and that would mean that the earth would have had to stop rotating. Joshua and his army would have been thrown into a heap by the shock. And imagine the energy that would be required to set it going again!

CARL: But God made the physical laws. Couldn't God modify them in some way in order for this to happen? All things are possible for God. The Bible says so.

NEIL: It's not so much *could* God but rather *would* God. (Pause) What about the virgin birth? Do you take that literally?

CARL: Well the Bible makes it clear that Mary was a virgin. Don't you just accept that?

NEIL: The English version of the Bible has virgin but the word that is used in Greek can mean a young woman or a virgin. The Greek is something of a mistranslation from the Hebrew. If *you* believe that she was literally a virgin that's fine. But it's biologically impossible. The Bible probably means that she had never slept with anyone other than Joseph. She was betrothed to Joseph. In those days that meant more than just engagement. They were virtually married.

CARL: That's the trouble with you and your modern interpretation. Why can't you accept what God has written in black and white. You always come up with theories about the meaning of words, and what's written in Hebrew or Greek or Latin. In any case, what's so biologically impossible about a virgin birth? There are species where this happens all the time.

NEIL: Look, the Bible is a wonderful resource for us Christians, which is why I read it every day. But we have to be very careful about how we read it. All I'm saying is that you can't read it all literally. You have to remember that, for a start, we don't have the original manuscripts. Secondly the biblical manuscripts were never intended to be a guide for Christians two thousand years later. Many were written to specific people in a particular time and addressing a particular situation. You have to understand the social context of the times in which the writers lived. I presume you don't believe that God dictated it word for word.

CARL: Well, yes, I think God did dictate it, through the Holy Spirit. I acknowledge that there are minor errors, here and there, in terms of detail. But you're making out that you have

to be an expert to interpret it. Next thing you'll be telling me that ordinary Christians shouldn't read it and that only the priests should interpret it, like in the Middle Ages.

NEIL: No, don't be silly. Why do you think I set aside some time each day to read it? But I'm open to learning about the context and learning from modern scholarship and keeping an open mind. As well as the Bible I read books about what it means, and go to Bible studies.

CARL: But the message of the Bible is so clear. Love God and love one another ... and love your enemies.

NEIL: There I'd agree with you. The important messages in the Bible come through loud and clear. But you know why they speak to you so loudly? The Holy Spirit operating in your life makes these teachings resonate with your personal experience of God. Personal experience is as valid as the Bible in knowing God. (*Pause*)

CARL: Do you believe *anything at all* in the Bible? What about the resurrection? Is this just a metaphor or did it really happen? And what about life after death?

NEIL: Well, I've often thought that the Kingdom of God refers to *this* life. But I suppose there is life beyond the grave. At least I hope so, but I really don't know what it looks like.

CARL: What do you mean you suppose. Doesn't the Bible clearly tell us so? Or are you trying to tell me that it's meant figuratively or that in Biblical times, life after death meant something else.

NEIL: Is this our train?

CARL: No it's the Central Coast train – ours is due to come soon afterwards – if you can believe the electronic board. So when it comes to the Bible telling us how to live our life, do you mean that we can't take it literally?

NEIL: That depends.

CARL: Depends?! So even here you quibble. How's an ordinary Christian supposed to know what to believe and how to live? I suppose you don't accept Paul's injunction that women should be silent in church. I know that in the Uniting Church we've some very good women ministers. But I've always been a bit uneasy about going against what the Bible says. Somehow it doesn't seem right.

NEIL: You have to remember that we're more enlightened these days about a woman's role in society. Back then there was no equality of the sexes. And besides, Paul was writing to a specific church where they were having trouble with the women.

CARL: I know a few churches like that. Anyway, I just want to be able to use the Bible as a set of rules, and live accordingly.

NEIL: So you follow the commandments in the Bible?

CARL: Of course.

NEIL: Which ones? Exodus 20 or Exodus 34?

CARL: What do you mean?

NEIL: There's two lots of 10 commandments – and they have similarities and differences.

CARL: Don't be difficult.

NEIL: Sorry. I was only trying to point out the difficulties of saying "I keep the 10 commandments" when you may not know which ones you are keeping, or not keeping. *(Pause)* So when was the last time you washed anyone's feet? When Jesus washed his disciples' feet he exhorted them to do likewise.

CARL: But that's different. Well I suppose I can see what you mean. But it makes living as a Christian so difficult.

NEIL: Does your wife wear a hat to church?

CARL: Well, no. Women haven't done that for years.

NEIL: Yet Paul said that women shouldn't have their heads uncovered in church.

CARL: Well, times have changes a bit. I think it's a woman's choice. Anyway, what about the Bible's attitude towards same-sex marriage?

NEIL: You've touched on a delicate matter there. I don't think any of the writers envisaged the possibility of same-sex marriage. There are many issues that arise that the Bible doesn't address.

CARL: Like what?

NEIL: Stem cell research, safe injecting rooms ...

CARL: But surely same-sex marriage is wrong. The Bible says so. Well, it doesn't say so precisely but it says that homosexuality is wrong, so there.

NEIL: I'm not so sure. I've struggled with same-sex relationships. When I recalibrate my thinking to the principle of love for my neighbour I can't reconcile that with objecting to two people having a happy and committed life together even though they're both men or both women. I know of many such relationships that are loving, exclusive, committed and permanent.

CARL: But the Bible describes it as an abomination.

NEIL: A minister once explained to me that in Biblical times homosexuality was synonymous with orgies and sex without commitment. The modern phenomenon of two guys living in a permanent relation, with mutual love and commitment, was totally unknown then.

CARL: So you do believe in same-sex marriage?

NEIL: It's not a matter of believing in it. It seems to be consistent with the principle of love. I'm more open to the possibility than I once was.

CARL: But it goes against the definition of the word 'marriage'. You can't change the meaning of a word just because it suits you.

NEIL: Don't forget that words change their meaning all the time. A 'gentleman' once meant 'a man of noble birth'. Now it just means 'a well-mannered male'. And in public toilets it just means 'male'. You don't have to be high-born, or even well-mannered to use the 'john'. My parents used to have a 'gay' time, and a website was something you swept away.

CARL: Yes, but ...

NEIL: We both know Nancy and her daughter Charlotte. Now the definition of 'daughter' usually means that the mother has given birth to her. And yet young Charlotte was born by surrogacy. So should we call her 'surrogate daughter'? But that would be unkind, because she and Jim love her just as much as if Nancy *had* been able to give birth. No, the meaning of the word 'daughter' has come to mean any girl who has the same relationship to a parent as if she had come out of her mother's womb.

CARL: What about the Uniting Church accepting openly gay people into the ministry? What do you say to that?

NEIL: You hit the nail on the head earlier. In the Bible it says that all things are possible for God, and that's why you are prepared to believe a miracle that goes against all known scientific knowledge.

CARL: Yes.

NEIL: So, if we agree that all things are possible, then it seems to me that it is wrong of us to say “God wouldn’t do something or other”. It seems inappropriate for humans to put boundaries around God.

CARL: I suppose so. That would be us telling God what God can and cannot do.

NEIL: Precisely. So what if God calls a person into ministry, regardless of gender? The process of the church discerning whether or not a person has the gifts for ministry still applies. The church still determines whether or not there is a genuine sense of call. The same principle applies regarding sexual orientation. Ultimately what is important is whether the church – you and I – discern a sense of God’s call on a person. There’s always new situations to consider.

CARL: That’s true. The Church leaders in the past used to speak about “The Lord has yet more light and truth ...”.

NEIL: Indeed – a bit like being in a dark tunnel, and coming out into light. Think about how previous generations had to face changing situations.

CARL: What, like Galileo saying that the earth revolved around the sun rather than the other way around?

NEIL: Yes – and how many church leaders tried to maintain slavery rather than abolish it.

CARL: My parents are teetotalers. They had to sign a pledge or something. Now we even have real wine for communion.

NEIL: Not at the church I go to; I think your parents must have been former Methodists.

CARL: Maybe they’ll change one day.

NEIL: So one of the issues for us today is same-sex marriage. I think the Uniting Church tackled the question about sexuality a while back, but you can’t expect everyone to agree. We have to balance the principle that God loves all people – even you and me – that’s the principle of love – with the principle that we shouldn’t be a stumbling block – that’s also follows from the principle of love.

CARL: Paul says that we should refrain from eating pork if it would be a stumbling block to our brother – and sister – even though there’s nothing wrong with it. But I’m not sure about all this sexuality stuff. It’s all so difficult, and I’m still trying to work through that question. I realise that it could lead to taking verses out of context, but I’m concerned that we end up with ‘anything goes’.

NEIL: Agreed. There are many issues that we need to think through and pray about, and we may find our views change as we go along. I think that's a good thing but it can be very difficult for some people. I'm glad to be part of the Uniting Church because it's a church that doesn't shy away from the tough issues, even though people may have very different views. It's good that we are able to include those who bring us a literal interpretation, and those who help us appreciate the context.

CARL: But here comes our train. It's been great talking to you. I can see that although your views are more liberal than mine, we're fellow Christians and I can learn a lot from you.

NEIL: Well I'm glad we had this conversation because it has reminded me that we should try not to get *too* carried away with interpretations. But I guess it's the Holy Spirit that guides us how to interpret God's word.

CARL: Anyway, for the rest of the trip, let's talk about how Roger Federer seems to be doing so much better this year after his couple of years in the wilderness. How do you think he's done it?

NEIL: Probably he spent a lot of time like us today?

CARL: What? Talking about the Bible?

NEIL: No. Training.

THE TRAIN OF LIFE

SCENE: *A railway carriage. Nicholas is seated and all the other seats are empty. Chris comes along the corridor from the right carrying two paper coffee cups and sits down opposite Nicholas.*

CHRIS: It was so busy down in the buffet car. I had to wait ages for the coffee. Here you are.

NICHOLAS: Thanks very much

CHRIS: Oh, where's Lisa gone?

NICHOLAS: Lisa? She got off at the last station.

CHRIS: I didn't realise she was getting off so soon.

NICHOLAS: Nor did she. The train stopped and she suddenly realised it was *her* stop.

CHRIS: *(after a pause)* It's a bit like death isn't?

NICHOLAS: What is? You mean nearly missing your station is like dying?

CHRIS: No. But here we are on a train. I mean that's like life. And we all get off at different stations. That's like dying. From our point of view it's just like Lisa has just died and we're here mourning her loss. She's no longer with us.

NICHOLAS: That's an interesting train of thought. Let me think about that for a moment. But from Lisa's point of view she's still alive, although in a different place.

CHRIS: I say, do you believe there's life after death? After we die do we just get off the train we call life and have a new sort of life?

NICHOLAS: Yes, I believe there's life after death. *(pause)* You're supposed to be a Christian. In fact, I recall you saying you are training to become a lay preacher. Don't *you* believe in eternal life?

CHRIS: Well I suppose I do, but I can't stop thinking that when my brain stops functioning there's no mechanism for me to have consciousness. And if I don't have consciousness I'm as good as being dead even if my heart is still beating. The brain holds all my memories and in a way when all my memories have gone I'm no longer me.

NICHOLAS: Well, how do you back up your computer?

CHRIS: Why have you changed the subject? Can't you stay on track? I suppose all this talk about death is getting you down. But if you really want to know I use iCloud. All my files are stored somewhere out there in cyberspace.

NICHOLAS: So if your computer gives up the ghost then I suppose all your files are lost.

CHRIS: No, of course not. I just buy a new one and I can then download all my files.

NICHOLAS: So, your computer has life after death. You buy a new computer – a new body – but its memory lives on. You see you're assuming that what you call 'you' is contained in that lump of tissue inside your head that you call your brain. But what if your brain is just that part of you that interacts with the material world and the real *you* exists in some sort of celestial cyberspace?

CHRIS: Oh, I suppose you can think of it like that. It's hard to imagine what life after death will be like. One thing I know for sure is that we'll be reunited with our loved ones. At least that's what people always say at funerals.

NICHOLAS: Yes. That's right. I went to a funeral in the country last week; the cemetery was in the dead centre of town, and the minister spoke in those terms. But it's interesting that the Bible doesn't actually say anything about being reunited with loved ones.

CHRIS: But some people who've had near death experiences have reported going down a long corridor towards the light and seeing their mother at the end beckoning them on.

NICHOLAS: Well, what about people who've had step parents or who've been adopted? Which mother might be there to beckon them?

CHRIS: Good point. I suppose that it's even more difficult with wives. Someone who has been married three times would have three wives holding out their arms to their newly dead husband. Even if he loved those wives who died before him, and only remarried because he was a widower, it could be very embarrassing. Imagine having to introduce wife number two to wife number one. When you remarry you might still love your first wife but you have to move on.

NICHOLAS: Or a mother who had two children, one of whom died very young, but the other outlived the elderly mother. They would each have their mother, but how would the two children recognise her.

CHRIS So there is probably a huge number of pastoral situations that make this all very tricky.

NICHOLAS: But here there's some very clear biblical teaching. The Sadducees (remember they didn't believe in resurrection) they tried to trip Jesus up by making up a hypothetical case of a woman who had seven husbands, one after the other. What they did in those times was that if a husband died without children his brother was obliged to marry the widow. In this story this happened seven times. One bride for seven brothers! Well, in heaven who was she married to?

CHRIS: Heaven only knows. How did Jesus get out of that one?

NICHOLAS: He simply declared that in heaven there's no such thing as being married. Don't forget that the marriage vow is only until 'death do us part'.

CHRIS: So I guess we'll all be single in heaven, just like the angels. Perhaps we won't even have sex ... I mean gender ... up in Heaven. There won't be a distinction between male and female.

NICHOLAS: That's dead interesting. I guess the resurrected life will be so different to life as we know it that many of the things we take for granted here just won't be relevant anymore.

CHRIS: I suppose that's because we won't have bodies in Heaven. We'll be disembodied spirits.

NICHOLAS: But that's another thing that the Bible seems quite definite about. The resurrection of the faithful is a resurrection of the body. After his resurrection Jesus was no ghost.

CHRIS: And yet there *was* something very different about his resurrected body. When Mary saw him in the garden she didn't recognise him at first. And he told her not to touch him because he hadn't yet ascended into Heaven. Then on the road to Emmaus the disciples didn't recognise him even though he walked with them and talked with them for some time. It was only when he broke bread with them that they knew who he was. And what about the time when the disciples were in a locked room and he suddenly appeared amongst them? Doesn't this sound more like a ghost or an apparition?

NICHOLAS: But isn't Thomas supposed to have put his fingers into the wounds of Jesus.

CHRIS: Did he? He did say he wouldn't believe that Jesus had risen unless he put his fingers into the holes where the nails had gone and his fist into the hole in his side. But did he actually do it? When Jesus suddenly materialised in that locked room, Thomas was there with the disciples. Jesus invited him to put his fingers and hand into the wounds but what did Thomas do? He just knelt down and declared "My Lord and my God". The Bible seems to suggest that Thomas no longer needed to touch Jesus in order to believe.

NICHOLAS: Maybe not, but Jesus made it quite clear that he was no ghost. In the locked room episode he actually said, “Look at my hands and feet – it is really I myself. Feel me and see. Ghosts have no flesh or bones as you can see that I have.” And to make it even clearer that he wasn’t just an apparition he asked, “I say, what’s for breakfast?” The disciples gave him some broiled fish which he ate. Now have you ever heard of a ghost asking for food, and actually eating it? No, his Resurrection was a resurrection of the body and this is what he promises us, I’m sure.

CHRIS: But which body? If it’s the body as it is at the moment of resurrection that would have been OK for Jesus because he’d only been dead for three days. But if I’m buried and don’t get resurrected for another thousand years I hate to think what I’d look like! And then, what if I’m cremated?

NICHOLAS: I know a few people who are dead against being cremated. I’m sure that’s why some branches of the Christian Church are against cremation. They want their body to be whole, ready for its resurrection. But I think that after a thousand years there wouldn’t be a whole lot of difference between a body that had been cremated and one that had been buried. No, perhaps the resurrected body is the body at the moment of death. This seems to be what happened with Jesus.

CHRIS: Yes, but if I am blown up then the moment of death would be a split second after my body was ripped apart. So if what you say is true my resurrected body would be in a thousand pieces. And if I die at the age of 100 I wouldn’t like to be resurrected as a feeble old man. And what about babies who die in the womb? It wouldn’t be much fun to be a foetus in Heaven!

NICHOLAS: I suppose you’re right. And what about people who’ve died and had their ashes scattered somewhere, such as into the ocean? I guess a resurrected body is a different sort of body, living mostly in a different universe where time and space might work quite differently.

CHRIS: OK, but would we remember our earthly lives when we reach Heaven?

NICHOLAS: You seem to be assuming that Heaven is the only after-life destination.

CHRIS: True, but I don’t want to get bogged down in debating whether Hell is an actual place or whether it’s the state of being alienated from God.

NICHOLAS: Remember the Biblical story about the rich man in Hell. He begged Abraham to send Lazarus down from Heaven with some water to put on his tongue. He remembered that this leper Lazarus used to beg at his gates. When Abraham said no, he asked Abraham to warn his brothers and to stop them joining him in that fiery Hell. So the rich man *could* remember his earthly life. I would assume that the same would be true in Heaven.

CHRIS: I agree with you. It would be a sort of cheat if I couldn't remember my earthly life when I get to Heaven. In what sense would it be *me* who was enjoying eternal life? I mean with a new body and a new mind I wouldn't really be me.

NICHOLAS: I suppose not. It'd be like a farmer who claims to have had the same axe for fifty years. But in that time the axe had had five new handles and three new heads!

CHRIS: I suppose if we don't remember our earthly life this would make things easier for that woman who'd had seven successive husbands. None of them would be able to remember that they'd ever been married to her and so there'd be no problem. But I agree with you. The Bible does seem to make it clear that memory doesn't get reformatted after resurrection. Jesus certainly hadn't forgotten Mary Magdalene.

NICHOLAS: Yes it *is* important to know that memory lives on after death. Imagine a widow who eventually follows her dearly departed husband only to find that he doesn't know who she is.

CHRIS: That's tragic enough in *this* life when a wife has Alzheimer's and doesn't recognise her husband. I presume that the memory that survives death is not as it was at the time of death.

NICHOLAS: No, I believe it is similar to what happens when the hard disk on our computer gets corrupted. We get a new computer and download the uncorrupted files from the Cloud. We all want to believe that we remember our loved ones after death.

CHRIS: But perhaps that's just wishful thinking on our part.

NICHOLAS: Maybe, although Jesus certainly remembered his disciples after the Resurrection. There's no doubt about us remembering our earthly life.

CHRIS: But if we'd led a tragic life or had a tragic death, or we had suffered abuse – we might not *want* to remember.

NICHOLAS: Perhaps from the perspective of Heaven we would see earthly tragedies in a different light. I remember being distraught one day when I was six. I had to stand up in front of my class to recite a poem. My mind froze and I completely forgot the words. At the time it was a tragedy of immense proportions. Today I just laugh about it. I know it's hard to imagine that one could reach a state where the really tragic events in this life could be seen as little blips with no real significance. But the thing is that we have no conception of what the resurrected life could be like.

CHRIS: Well, do you think we'll still have free will in Heaven?

NICHOLAS: I'm glad to see that you've brought that skeleton out of the cupboard, and that you agree that we do enjoy free will in *this* life, and that we aren't just machines.

CHRIS: Well, if we're simply pre-ordained biological machines then what we've been doing this morning is just so much pre-determined babble. It would have no significance as a discussion. There would no longer be such a thing as truth. No, despite what some people say we *do* have free will. That's why we can be held accountable for our actions. But what about after death? Will we still have the ability to choose?

NICHOLAS: Why not? If we have free will here, why not somewhere where it's all so much better?

CHRIS: Then in Heaven I could choose to reject God and sin could therefore exist in Heaven.

NICHOLAS: Remember that's already been done! There is at least one case of a rebellion in Heaven mentioned in the Bible. Isn't that why Satan was cast out of Heaven?

CHRIS: One thing for sure is that when I die I'll be able to catch up on a lot of sleep.

NICHOLAS: Yes, I've often wondered why there's always so much emphasis on resting in peace after death. I guess if I die after a long and difficult illness, resting in peace might be OK. But if I drop dead on the golf course then resting for eternity doesn't seem much to look forward to.

CHRIS: The peace bit would be OK. It's just the rest bit. Resting should be a pause between two lots of activity. But then Jesus didn't say that eternal life just means sleeping. He certainly didn't rest after the resurrection. He spoke to people, went for walks and went to breakfast parties. I think that somehow the resting bit has crept in as part of the mythology of death.

NICHOLAS: Perhaps those who sculpted the effigies for crypts found it easier to make reclining figures at sleep rather than figures engaging in some interesting activity.

CHRIS: But isn't there something in the Bible about the dead sleeping until we shall all be raised together at the Second Coming? That suggests that sleeping in death is only a temporary state and not how it will be forever.

NICHOLAS: I've often wondered whether, before I was born, I asked myself what life after birth might be like. But I can't remember back that far.

CHRIS: Perhaps, before they're born, twins somehow communicate with one another and ask the same sort of questions about life as we're asking about death. What will life outside

the womb be like? Will it be as good as life in the uterus? I strongly believe that the quality of life after death exceeds earthly life as much as earthly life exceeds life in the womb.

NICHOLAS: I don't suppose the caterpillar can comprehend what it will be like being a butterfly. So although it's perfectly natural to wonder about such things we shouldn't be too concerned that we don't have much in the way of answers. At least we're one up on the caterpillars because we have Jesus. In a way he's like a butterfly who became a caterpillar in order to help us to become butterflies.

CHRIS: You know we seem to know very little about life after death. As Christians we know that it exists, that we'll be in some sort of environment where we have bodies, that we'll see God and indeed be close to God, that it will be far more wonderful than our earthly life. We know that we'll remember our earthly life and we'll be with our loved ones and will continue to love them – but our relationships will somehow be on a different footing.

NICHOLAS: Yes, on earth we seem to only be able to love some by excluding others. We choose a partner to the exclusion of all others. If we have children we love our children in a different way to the way we love our neighbour's children. But I believe that in Heaven there will be no such limitations. As we become like God we'll love everyone as God loves everyone.

CHRIS: Whoops, I've just realised. This is my station. I have to get off here. Thanks for sharing your thoughts.

NICHOLAS: No worries.

CHRIS: I'll see you next time.

NICHOLAS: If not in this life then perhaps in the other.

IN GRANDPA'S NURSING HOME

SCENE: *The garden of a nursing home.*

JOE: Hi Gramps. How are you feeling today?

GRAMPS: Oh, not so bad. If I make it to next week I'll be 86.

JOE: Wow that's old! Can you remember when you were only six?

GRAMPS: Of course I can. I can remember getting the Christopher Robin book *Now We Are Six* for Christmas when I was only five and a half and I felt guilty reading it because I wasn't yet six. And now I'm almost 86 but the days of my childhood seem like yesterday. In fact the older I get the more recent my younger days seem to be.

JOE: It must be awful to be old. I hope I never become old.

GRAMPS: If you keep driving the way you do I think you'll get your wish.

JOE: I didn't mean that. I'd like to live to 100 but stay 20 the whole time.

GRAMPS: Wouldn't we all!

JOE: I wonder why God made us so that we grow old. Why couldn't he have arranged for us to stay at a certain age, say 40, until he decides it's time for us to go?

GRAMPS: He must have his reasons. St Paul grumbled that when he was young he was carried about where he didn't want to go and when he was old ...

JOE: ... he was carried about where he didn't want to go. Yes life's like that – going around in a great big circle. When you're a baby you're dependent on others and when you're old the same is true. A toddler learning to walk has a walker and an old person has a walking frame. There's not that much difference between them.

GRAMPS: Well I haven't quite got to the stage of a walking frame yet, but my stick *does* come in handy to steady me. But you're right. Old age is rather like being a baby in many ways. A baby has no teeth and has to eat baby food and an old person often has to eat mashed food in the end.

JOE: So if we end up back to the same helpless state in which we came into the world, what's the purpose of life? I mean what does it achieve?

GRAMPS: Now Joe, going around in circles can be misleading – you might in fact be getting to a different level. Remember when you were with grandma in that multi-level parking station? She said you were wasting your time going round and round in circles because it was clear there were no parking spots. She didn't twig to the fact that you were getting higher and higher! There's quite a difference between being young and being old – apart from the obvious ones.

JOE: The only difference I can see is that when you're young you've got your whole life ahead of you. When you're old it's all behind you.

GRAMPS: Ah but there's an even more important difference. A new born baby is just a bundle of selfish desires.

JOE: Gramps, how can you say that? Babies are like angels, coming straight from heaven. Don't tell me you believe in that 'original sin' nonsense?

GRAMPS: The theologians of old were grasping after a truth but they have a lot to answer for calling it 'original sin'. However, when you think about it, babies are intrinsically selfish. Their whole world revolves around themselves. Of course God creates them that way. It's part of his plan.

JOE: And what do you think is that plan?

GRAMPS: Everyone is born with free will and desires and the purpose of life is learning to control them – in learning that there are other people in the world besides ourselves, with their own desires. The purpose of life is to learn to love – to loves God and to love others.

JOE: But surely a newborn baby loves its mother.

GRAMPS: True, but you must admit it's a very selfish form of love – it's a love that's motivated by need. And when you meet you life's partner the love you feel for her is largely motivated by what she can do for you.

JOE: Grandpa, I never thought of you as a cynic! You make young romantic love sound sordid.

GRAMPS: Sorry if it comes across that way. I'm just being brutally honest. There's nothing wrong with sex appeal and romantic love. God is happy for us to fall in love, even if it's largely a selfish love in the beginning.

JOE: So was that how it was with you and Grandma?

GRAMPS: Of course. When I first met your grandma I was conscious of how good looking she was, what a great dancer she was and how well she could cook. And oh boy, how she

made me laugh! In other words I was fixated on what she could do for *me*. But that's how young love is supposed to be in the beginning. Then, if you have a good marriage, over the years it develops into a deeper sort of love – a sort of merging together. That's how it is with God. God desires that we exercise our free will in choosing to become one with him.

JOE: But isn't there a danger in losing our individuality if we merge our souls into God? Surely individuality is a good thing. Doesn't God want us to be ambitious?

GRAMPS: When you're young, like you my boy, individuality and ambition are good things. God wants us to be ambitious because it exercises the talents that he has given us. But if we're not careful, being ambitious can make us very selfish. We might walk all over other people in an effort to be rich or famous – to be better than others. However, as we get older, God wants us to learn to be happy when other people succeed, rather than being jealous of others' success. In that way we become less of an individual in a funny sort of way.

JOE: Gee, this is getting a bit too deep for me. So, tell me Gramps, what it's like getting old? I'd really like to know because, despite my driving, I hope I'll be 86 one day. In a way I think of you as a trail blazer. You're the forward scout, helping me to prepare for what's ahead.

GRAMPS: That's a nice way of putting it.

JOE: Well what's the worst part of getting old?

GRAMPS: Well, when I retired I had a hard time adjusting. One day I was in charge of a large company and the next day I was a nobody. Whenever I went back I found that the company was managing perfectly well without me. I just felt useless. I wasn't the only one. When I was 66 people my age were always going on about how busy they had been since they retired. "I don't know how I ever found time to go to work," they would say. It seemed to me that some of them were just trying to justify their continued existence by bragging about all the things they were doing.

JOE: Almost as if they stopped being frantically busy they'd be ready for the scrapheap.

GRAMPS: Exactly. God doesn't love us because of the number of things we do. Nor, I'm happy to say, does our family. They value us for what we *are* not what we *do*. Of course being retired gave me time to do things your Gran and I had always wanted to, like seeing the world. And I started volunteering for Community Aid. But I also enjoyed times when I just sat and thought about life and I tried not to feel guilty about my 'grandpa sleeps' in the afternoon.

JOE: And what about now? Do you find life satisfying?

GRAMPS: Funnily enough I do. Oh, I don't do as much as I used to but I've learnt not to feel guilty about that. The trouble with this place is that they're always wanting you to *do* things. "Come on Mr Fosco, come and play Bingo." "I'm sure you'd like to join in on the community singing in the lounge – all those old songs that you remember." They mean well, but personally I can't think of anything worse than Bingo or Community Singing.

JOE: So what do you do all day?

GRAMPS: I used to do a lot of community work, such as driving old ladies to their doctor's appointments. But now I no longer drive I've had to give that up. I read a lot, and listen to my CDs. I go for walks and feed the birds. And I'm not entirely anti-social. I enjoy the bus outings they organise. And I read my Bible every day and go to a Bible Study every week. You'd think at my age I'd know everything about the Bible, but while the words remain familiar the meaning seems to change. I suppose my life must seem boring to you.

JOE: Does it seem boring to you?

GRAMPS: Not at all. Perhaps that's because I've slowed down and adjusted to a quieter life-style. And remember that someone of my age has many more memories than you have.

JOE: But Gramps. You shouldn't live in the past!

GRAMPS: Why not ... at least some of the time? For you it might seem that the past no longer exists, but not for me. Your Grandmother still exists for me even though she died ten years ago. In God's eyes our lives are like a book. We have to walk through it without stopping but God can read whatever part he wants. For example yesterday I was remembering when I took my Harley Davidson from Sydney to Darwin. I was about your age.

JOE: Wow, I never knew that. I guess I've always thought of you as always being old. But of course, you were my age once. I guess I forget when I walk around this place, that all those old people I see probably had very interesting lives when they were younger.

GRAMPS: Take my word for it, they do. I've had some very interesting talks with a lot of them. Look at that old man over there. That's Simon Johnson, if that's his real name. He was once a spy working for MI5. Jean Simmons over there used to be the leading dancer at the Tivoli. She once showed me photos of when she was young. She looked like a million dollars. Colin, sitting on that bench over there was once the moderator of the Uniting Church. And that lady who's talking to him, is Susan Smith. She has a bronze medal from the Melbourne Olympics.

JOE: But that's all in the past. Doesn't it depress you that you no longer contribute to society?

GRAMPS: Tell me Joe, What sort of work are you in? You told me but I forget. Something to do with computers?

JOE: I do the web pages for a chain of bottle shops.

GRAMPS: I suppose you think that long after you're dead, people will remember you as the great web designer for the Cork and Screw chain of bottle shops. Face it. Once you retire someone else will take over from you and they'll design completely different web pages. Your work will be totally in the past and, if that past no longer exists, your work will have been for nothing. Does that depress you?

JOE: I suppose it does. But we all want to leave a legacy when we die. It's awful to think that what we spend the best years of our lives doing, in the end counts for nothing. Maybe I won't be remembered for my web design, but don't forget that my band has made a few recordings.

GRAMPS: That's great, but how many people will be listening to them in fifty years time?

JOE: Gramps, are you trying to depress me? I thought you were proud of me and the band.

GRAMPS: Sorry Joe. No, of course I am. I'm just trying to point out that wanting to be remembered after we die is no substitute for eternal life. Everyone in the world has heard of Donald Trump but how many will remember him in a hundred years time? Why, in a thousand years even Shakespeare or Einstein might be unknown to the average person.

JOE: So, doesn't it depress you that in the long run your life will have been for nothing?

GRAMPS: Well my 9 to 5 work has already been forgotten. When I die I will live on in the memories of my friends and family. That might give me another eighty years or so of that sort of immortality. But in two hundred years time I'll be lucky to be more than an entry in someone's family tree – just a name and a couple of dates.

JOE: I get it. Immortality is not for the individual but it's the genes that go on and on. No wonder some men are obsessed with sowing their seeds widely.

GRAMPS: A bit tough for those who have no children. No, eternal life has nothing to do with perpetuating one's genes.

JOE: You mean it's about living forever in heaven.

GRAMPS: That's part of it. But another part of the miracle of eternal life is the fact that the past always exists. It's part of the eternal story. But what's more important is that one becomes part of the eternal God. Wanting to be remembered after we die, or wanting to live forever as an individual, is basically selfish. I don't claim to understand eternity, but I

believe that our individuality will become less important in heaven as we become one with God.

JOE: Phew, that's all too difficult for me to understand.

GRAMPS: Me too.

JOE: Well, getting back to the here and now, what should I be doing to prepare for getting old?

GRAMPS: Hmm, that's a difficult question. I suppose that to get through the shock of retirement it's important to develop interests outside of your job. You've got your rock band, so that might keep you going for some time after you retire. Developing relationships is important too – becoming part of a community, like a church. And having patience is crucial. As his body slows down the impatient man becomes bitter and depressed. Accepting one's limitations as one becomes more and more frail is essential. But old age isn't such a gloomy time as you might think.

JOE: Doesn't the prospect of death depress you?

GRAMPS: One thing about getting old is that death doesn't seem the ogre that it appears to be when you're young. I don't say that I'm actively looking forward to death – that may come. But I'm content that I've had a good life so when it does come I won't fight it.

JOE: But isn't it good to not give up and to fight old age?

GRAMPS: I don't say I've given up. According to life expectancy tables I've still got, on average, another 6 years. And if I do make it to 92, on average I've got another 2 or 3 years. At that rate I could live forever, like Zeno's tortoise.

JOE: Zeno who?

GRAMPS: There you go. He was a famous Greek philosopher who lived 2500 years ago and most people these days have never heard of him. But I may not have enough life expectancy left to explain his paradox to you. What I was trying to say is that accepting the fact that one is old is not the same as giving up. Some people go to great lengths to pretend that they're still young. I mean, take your Auntie Helen. She's in her 60s and she still wears mini skirts and stilettos. I've lost track of the number of face-lifts she's had – probably fewer than the number of husbands. No, accepting old age is quite different to giving up.

JOE: Well I suppose you're looking forward to being united with Grandma.

GRAMPS: I would like to. But remember that I won't be married to her. There's something that Jesus said about there being no such thing as marriage in heaven.

JOE: Well can't you propose to her all over again?

GRAMPS: I would if that's how it works. But I somehow feel that relationships in heaven are quite different to what they are on earth.

JOE: Do you often think about what sort of funeral you want?

GRAMPS: Not really, I don't expect I'll be bothered about it on the day so it doesn't really matter! Anyway, don't I have another six years, on average, to think about it? I know your Grandma had chosen all the hymns for her funeral ten years before she died but I'll just take it as it comes. I suppose if I was to make any comment about my funeral I want it to be happy but not a festival. I hate those funerals where you walk into the crematorium with some crooner singing "We'll Meet Again" or "The Carnival Is Over". What's wrong with a good old hymn or two? And I'd like less time spent by people telling stories about how wonderful I was and more time on hearing God's word about life and death and eternal life.

JOE: I'll keep that in mind if I'm involved in planning your funeral. Well, thanks for the insight you have given me. I really think of you as a trail blazer, walking a track that I hope to walk one day.

GRAMPS: And try to drive more slowly. I'd hate to have to go to *your* funeral!

IN EASTWOOD PARK

SCENE: *Harry and Ken are jogging in opposite directions past a park bench. As they pass each other they stop.*

HARRY: O hi, Ken, you're out early.

KEN: So are you. How many steps have you done so far?

HARRY: *(looks at his smart watch)* Over 5000. My daily target is 10000.

KEN: I've only just started, but I'm puffed out already. How about if we sit down for a few minutes and catch up.

They sit on the bench.

KEN: I haven't seen you at church for a few months.

HARRY: Oh, I've found a new church that suits me much better – the Church of the Rising Sun. Cute name, isn't it – double meaning. 'Rising Sun' suggests that we're looking to the future ...

KEN: I get it – and 'rising sun' suggests "the risen Son". So what's so good about the Church of the Rising Sun?

HARRY: I like their teaching.

KEN: In what way?

HARRY: Well they're really Bible based. And it's all so simple. There's never any uncertainty. There's a clear answer to every question. I once went to a study group at the Uniting Church and the minister kept asking us lots of questions, and whenever we asked him what the Bible passage means he'd say, "well, it depends on the interpretation" and then he'd spend five minutes exploring different points of view. You'd think that with all his training he'd know all the answers.

KEN: So your new minister?

HARRY: He just tells us the answers and we write them down.

KEN: But the Bible is a difficult book to interpret, and there are often several layers of meaning.

HARRY: I think that's just a cop-out. All this Biblical scholarship just clouds the issue. Our minister says you just read the straight-forward message. And there's a clear answer to every question. It's a bit like Mathematics. I loved Maths at school for that very reason. You know where you are. An answer is either right or wrong and you don't get schools of thought where some say that six times seven is forty-two and others say that there's a deeper layer of meaning where it's twenty-four.

KEN: Well, actually, there *are* parts of Mathematics where things aren't so clear cut. I did a course at Uni on infinite set theory and it opened my mind to some of the deep mysteries of Mathematics.

HARRY: What's infinite set theory when it's at home?

KEN: It's something that underlies all of Maths. A set is just a collection of things like numbers and there are infinitely many of them.

HARRY: So, what's new? Even *I* knew that.

KEN: But did you know that there are many infinities, bigger and bigger ones? And there's even an arithmetic of infinities.

HARRY: Come off it.

KEN: It's true. A fellow called Georg Cantor discovered this in the late 19th century. What's even more remarkable is that there are some questions that one can pose about these infinities where there's no answer. You can make some statements about infinities for which we'll never know whether they are true or false.

HARRY: But such a statement has to be either true or false. So it is just a question of time till some bright genius can decide which. You can't say that we can *never* know the answer.

KEN: In fact mathematicians have proved that it is logically impossible for us to ever know the answer. They can prove that it's logically *impossible* to prove that they're true and it's logically *impossible* to prove that they're false. So your genius can only answer the question by defying the laws of logic.

HARRY: So you're telling me that such things become articles of faith, like a belief in God.

KEN: Well, yes. After all, all of Mathematics is built on certain basic assumptions that you can't prove. You can't prove anything out of nothing. So these basic assumptions in Maths are like a religious creed. And some of these involve infinite numbers.

HARRY: It sounds like nonsense to me! You seem to be saying that there are different types of Mathematics depending on the fundamental assumptions. So if an engineer rejects one of these axioms her bridge might collapse because she's using the wrong sort of Mathematics!

KEN: No, when it comes to that part of Mathematics that can be applied to the real world it seems that all these variant Mathematics agree, though we can't prove that.

HARRY: I'm only interested in practical things, so I want the simplest Mathematics one can get. Why are you bamboozling me with all these uncertainties?

KEN: I just wanted to point out that there is mystery and complexity in all knowledge – even in mathematics. I suppose that's because all knowledge comes from God who is both mysterious and complex.

HARRY: But the Bible is so clear cut on how we should live our lives. It's obviously against gay marriage, women ministers, abortion and euthanasia.

KEN: It's not as simple as it seems. Take gay marriage for example. The Bible *does* come down pretty strongly against homosexuality. But you have to remember that in the ancient world homosexuality was largely something heterosexual men did for a lark and it was always associated with licentiousness and orgies. The modern phenomenon of two gay people living monogamously with each other in a stable and loving permanent relationship was unknown in Biblical times. So it's the licentiousness that the Bible is against, not the same sex bit. Medical science is coming round to believe that homosexuality is not a life-style choice but is rather hard wired for some individuals. So if God created men and women that way shouldn't we accept that and the fact that they should have the same rights as the rest of us.

HARRY: I'm not so sure about that. But let's come to euthanasia.

KEN: I know many very nice young Asian people.

HARRY: Sorry?

KEN: You mentioned youth in Asia.

HARRY: No! Euthanasia – assisted dying. According to the Bible it's either suicide or murder. Only God can decide when a life should end. Only when it's God's will that a person should die should their life come to an end. Anything that goes against God's will is clearly wrong.

KEN: To tell you the truth, I'm very wary of euthanasia myself. But the argument that something that seems to go against God's will is wrong can be dangerous. Any medical intervention can be outlawed on that principle because, for example, if you have cancer then

you could argue that it's God's will that you should die and chemotherapy could be considered going against what God has ordained.

HARRY: But that's nonsense.

KEN: That's exactly what I'm saying. God, through evolution, has set up things, such as the immune system but that doesn't mean He's against medical innovations such as chemotherapy or immunization. He gave us brains to come up with ways of *improving* on Nature.

HARRY: So don't tell me that you're in favour of euthanasia.

KEN: On the contrary, I don't like the idea. But I wouldn't want to rule it out altogether even though I think it would be wrong for it to be the normal way people end their lives. I think we should be extremely cautious and build into our legislation very stringent safeguards. But nor should we feel that it is a complete no-no. Above all we should continue to strive for better palliative care.

HARRY: And what about abortion. Surely that's wrong because it involves the taking of a life.

KEN: The difficulty here is in determining when life begins. It certainly doesn't start the moment we move down the birth canal. We're starting to get legislation that gives an unborn baby human rights. But I can't accept that a single fertilised cell is a human being.

HARRY: So where do you draw the line?

KEN: That's the problem – you can't. It's like asking how much hair you have to lose before you can be considered to be bald.

HARRY: But a single fertilised egg may not be a person, but it's a *potential* person.

KEN: That's the argument that's often used against contraception. You could say that the baby that you're preventing by contraception is a potential person and it's wrong to deny it life.

HARRY: Yes I do believe that contraception is wrong. It's thwarting God's plan.

KEN: But suppose that I propose to a girl and she turns me down. Now if we *had* married we would probably have had kids, but because she turned me down those kids will never be born. So is she guilty of murder because she's prevented some potential human beings from being born?

HARRY: Now you're being silly.

KEN: No, I'm just pointing out that *potential* human beings are not actual human beings and so the fact that a single fertilised egg is merely a potential human being doesn't give it human status.

HARRY: So it seems that you're in favour of abortion.

KEN: Only in certain circumstances. There are many circumstances where I would consider it to be the right thing to do. For example if a woman is pregnant following a rape or if the foetus has a severe abnormality, abortion should be allowed – up to a certain point in the pregnancy. But it shouldn't be seen as one of the normal methods of contraception. People say that a woman should be allowed to control her own body and, to a large extent I go along with that. But what is often overlooked is the fact that sometimes a woman who has aborted a baby later feels guilt or regrets the decision. It's not an easy question. To decide what is right in a particular case is difficult enough, but to make up a set of rules to cover all circumstances would be extremely complex.

HARRY: But I want moral questions to be easy. The orthodox Jews have it easy. You only have to remember all the rules, and follow them. You don't have to think through why they should be followed. Christians, it seems, are supposed to make up their own rules, depending on circumstances, ethics according to the situation.

KEN: Well, yes, but although there are many rules in the Bible, there is a large number that modern Christians are perfectly happy to ignore, such as the dietary rules of the Old Testament or the injunction to wash one another's feet in the New Testament. What Christians have are values, *principles*, not rules. The principle of Love should be our guide. After all, Jesus himself broke the Old Testament rules by healing on the Sabbath, and he justified this by appealing to the principal of Love.

HARRY: You make Christianity so complicated that you have to have a PhD to be a Christian!

KEN: On the contrary. Simple uneducated people can't cope with myriads of rules so they just follow instinct, and the principal of Love. You could say that this instinct is the Holy Spirit working in their lives. More educated people often get bogged down with rules and, like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus, become fixated on fine points of law. But great minds are able to rise above the rigidity of rules and recognise that, in the end, the principal of Love reigns supreme. Of course it's not always easy to work out how that principal should operate in a specific situation. So the Christian faith is both very simple and very complex. Now, what was the other matter you wanted to discuss? Oh yes, whether women should have positions of authority in the Church.

HARRY: That one's easy. My minister at the Church of the Rising Sun, says they shouldn't and says that women's brains are less developed than men's and the fact that Jesus was a

man proves that God only entrusts his truth to men. I like the church, and the minister, but I don't agree with him on that.

KEN: So, you're not so certain after all?! And you're happy to go against what is clearly stated in Paul's writings?

HARRY: You've got me thinking about values rather than certainties. I remember the minister at the Uniting Church say that there were specific problems with women in certain early churches and that he was addressing these specific issues rather than laying down universal rules? Maybe there is some value in what the Uniting Church minister is saying, after all.

KEN: Yes, I do remember that, too, and he said that it was a cultural thing. Our world is completely different with regards to women's place in society and the Church has been blessed by female ministers as much as male ones. Well, it's nice talking to you, Harry. Hope I run into you again.

HARRY: Yes, see you later.

They start jogging off in the opposite directions to the ones they had arrived in. Ken stops and turns and calls out.

KEN: Hey Harry, you were going the other way when we met up.

HARRY: Whoops! I was distracted by thinking about our conversation. After our conversation I'm going to go a different way. Bye

KEN: See you at the Uniting Church, then. Bye!

They both turn around and jog back in their original directions.

AT COVENT GARDEN

SCENE: *Nigel and Bruce are at the ballet, sitting in a box at Covent Garden theatre.*

BRUCE: That was a great idea of yours to order a box for us. Now we can chat to each other throughout the performance without disturbing anyone.

NIGEL: Yes I thought you might get bored with the ballet so I booked this box for the two of us two and I got seats in the stalls for our partners. There's your wife Rosemary down there and there's my partner, Peter.

They wave to those two in the stalls.

NIGEL: The ballet is about to begin.

BRUCE: I don't know what Rosemary sees in all this stuff. She insisted I come too but I'd rather watch Manchester United play Chelsea.

NIGEL: I really enjoy the ballet. This one is *Swan Lake* and it's so beautiful.

BRUCE: Oh, I'm sorry. I won't talk any more.

NIGEL: Oh no, that's alright – I've seen it many times. Besides I can multi-task and listen to the ballet while we talk. So you enjoy football?

BRUCE: Oh, it's really awesome the way some of the great players can outwit their opponents.

NIGEL: I think I would be just as bored at a football match as you are watching ballet.

BRUCE: I would be bored if I had to sit down there next to Rosemary and sit still. We've got different tastes ... but I like talking to you. So what shall we talk about?

NIGEL: We could talk about our faith. We're both Christians so we've got a lot in common.

BRUCE: OK. Well what did your minister preach about last Sunday?

NIGEL: He preached on *The Hope of Heaven*.

BRUCE: There now, I think that if there's one thing more boring than ballet, it must be Heaven. I only want to go to Heaven because the alternative is highly unattractive ... all that fire and brimstone. But I don't think I would enjoy Heaven ... unless they play footy up there. Do you think they do?

NIGEL: I don't think so. But there won't be any ballet either.

BRUCE: But they do play harps all day, don't they? You'd probably like that.

NIGEL: I don't think there'll be any harps either.

BRUCE: But the Bible is always talking about angels playing harps 'to the glory of God' so even if we don't have to learn to *play* them we'll be forced to listen to them.

NIGEL: I quite enjoy harp music, but I don't think there'll be any in Heaven.

BRUCE: And what about all those pearly gates and streets of gold. It was bad enough having to traipse around all those cathedrals when Rosemary and I went on holiday on the continent last year. And I never want to see another Russian religious icon for the rest of my life, with all that gold leaf.

NIGEL: But Heaven will be full of pleasures that we couldn't possibly understand in this life. The biblical writers just used harps and pearly gates and streets of gold as metaphors. I believe the joy of Heaven will be totally different to any earthly pleasure and will surpass them all.

BRUCE: Well why didn't the biblical authors come straight out and tell us what Heaven will really be like ... instead of all those silly metaphors.

NIGEL: But, as I just said, our earthly language isn't able to express the joys of Heaven. Just imagine that you had to describe football to some native on a remote desert island and suppose the people on this island have only just come into contact with the outside world and had never heard of football, let alone watched a match. Imagine you had to describe football in the local language. You'd probably say that football is like a war between two tribes. One tribe starts at one end of the beach and the other tribe starts at the other end. They run up and down kicking a piece of leather.

BRUCE: They may not know what 'leather' is.

NIGEL: Well perhaps you could say it was a coconut. Anyway, the two tribes have to kick this coconut up and down the beach until it goes between two certain trees at one end or the other of the beach. Do you think the native would find it as fascinating as you do? He'd probably say that "there be many coconuts under dat tree so I go pick up one near dem two trees and let other fellers fight over other coconut".

BRUCE: I see what you mean. And, come to think about it, I can't think how I'd explain the off side rules to a native. I can't even get Rosemary to understand them.

NIGEL: Well we're all a bit like that when it comes to Heaven. We're incapable of understanding what Heaven will be like. We're just like the native who'd much rather lie in the sun than go running after a silly coconut.

BRUCE: Perhaps there's something even more enjoyable than soccer in the Eternal City. But it won't be much fun for you if there's no ballet there and, if I believe you, not even harps!

NIGEL: There was a Christian writer, once, who wrote about 'desire'.

BRUCE: Isn't there something in the Bible about putting away all earthly desires? I think the Bible teaches us to get rid of all desires ... a bit like the Buddhists. We should learn to live without having any fun. I believe that a person without desires would make a good Christian, but I haven't yet overcome my desire to see a good game of footie.

NIGEL: But Christianity is diametrically opposite to Buddhism when it comes to desire and enjoyment. The Buddhist strives for a life without desire whereas Christianity teaches that desire is not only permitted, it is central to the Christian faith.

BRUCE: I can't believe that I'm hearing this. How do you support this radical view? Do you mean I should go to strip clubs to satisfy my desire for a woman's body?

NIGEL: Of course not. C.S. Lewis said that all earthly desires are good, in fact they're all a desire for God – if only we could see that. It isn't the desire itself that's wrong. It's our stupidity in not recognising that what we are *really* desiring is God. And then there are all the inappropriate ways we go about trying to satisfy that desire. He said that every desire is, at heart, really a desire for God. But many of these desires can get horribly distorted.

BRUCE: I don't get that. Years ago I used to smoke ... two packets a day. I'd wake up in the morning with a desire for a fag.

NIGEL: I presume you mean cigarette. You have to be careful with that word. When I was in the U.S.A. I said I was dying for a fag and I got these strange stares. Apparently there it means a homosexual.

BRUCE: Point taken. Well I'd wake up in the morning dying for a cigarette. Then ten minutes later I'd want another. You can't tell me that my desire for a cigarette was really a desire for God, in disguise. That's nonsense!

NIGEL: You have to look beyond the object that you think you desire. What you desired was not a cigarette. It was the kick that the nicotine gave you. You felt more alert. It was the feeling of being better able to perform your work that you desired, not the nicotine.

BRUCE: That might have been true when I first started. There was also, probably, a desire to be accepted by my mates as one of the gang. I was only smoking a couple of cigs a day back then. But then I found that a couple of cigarettes didn't satisfy me. So I gradually increased the number until I was chain smoking. I finally had to have therapy to help me quit.

NIGEL: You thought you desired cigarettes but in fact you desired mental alertness and self-esteem in the company of your peers.

BRUCE: But that's hardly a desire for God.

NIGEL: Well, God gave you mental gifts and you can be more aware of the presence of God when you are mentally alert. But you have since discovered that there are other ways of being mentally alert that are not so destructive. And you were created in God's image. Having a healthy self-esteem is one way of honouring God. Pride in one's achievements is a good thing. It's only when it turns into an unhealthy arrogance that it becomes corrupted.

BRUCE: So you're saying that my desire for football is really a desire for God?

NIGEL: You probably think that what you desire is the sport itself. But behind that is a desire for excitement and for the sheer magic when a top player achieves the impossible. It's God who gives the player his or her great talent, and excitement is a quality that I'm sure we'll find when we're with God. They say at funerals, "may she rest in peace", but while resting in peace might be appropriate when someone has battled with cancer for a long time it would be boring to be resting in peace for all eternity! I strongly believe that Heaven will be far from that. 'Peace' perhaps, but certainly not 'resting'. There will be excitement in Heaven, though what it will be like is more than I can tell.

BRUCE: So your desire for music and dance is really a desire for God?

NIGEL: Most certainly. I've had moments of sublime emotion when listening to music or watching a ballet. I've felt at these moments that it is the music that I really wanted. I once felt this when playing a certain piece on a DVD. I wanted to repeat the feeling by playing it over and over. After a few times the music seemed banal and I no longer felt any emotion. It was a bit like your cigarettes. I soon realised that my desire was not for the music itself but for the sublime feeling that was awakened by the music at that time. I soon came to realise that the music itself didn't really satisfy my desire. The desire went far beyond. It's like being in a prison and glimpsing a beautiful garden through the bars. We might think that the limited view is what we desire. Then one day, when we're released and we can roam the whole garden freely, we realise that what we were really desiring was the freedom, and the fresh air. And behind *these* desires is a desire for God.

BRUCE: Well, there's a lot to think about there. Let me tell you about my church. I used to enjoy the serenity of the services, but lately they've been jazzing it up in ways that I feel are disrespectful to our Lord. They've started including hymns without all the thee's and thou's

and they've even included a saxophone accompaniment to the piano. In fact they're using the piano as much as the organ these days. I don't know why they can't use the organ all the time ... goodness knows we paid enough to get it restored last year. The other Sunday we even had a hymn set to the tune of the *Dambuster's March*. I mean, how disrespectful is that? And the new minister even makes jokes in his sermons. The last straw was last Sunday when they had this young girl dancing out the front during one of the hymns. I'm going to have to find another church where the service is conducted in a more reverential manner.

NIGEL: I'm sorry to hear that you don't relate to the joy and happiness that seems to have crept into your church services with this new minister. I agree that there's a place for quiet reflection and seriousness. But there's also a place for joy and exuberance. The Psalms are full of injunctions to 'make a joyful noise unto the Lord' and Jesus himself was often found at parties, celebrating someone or other's wedding. And, if you read the Gospels carefully, you'll find that Jesus often made jokes to get his point across. He was great with the humour of exaggeration. When he said that if you have the faith of a mustard seed you can tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea. His listeners, used to this sort of exaggerated humour, would never have taken him literally. For a start why would anyone want to throw a mountain into the sea? But generations of devout Christians have taken him literally. His point was that lots of things that we might have thought impossible can be achieved through faith, and that has been proved true over the centuries. No, Jesus was certainly no wet blanket and he knew how to have fun.

BRUCE: Well, talking about 'desire', usually 'desire' means the desire of a man for a woman.

NIGEL: Or the desire of a man for a man.

BRUCE: Of course, or a woman for either a man or a woman. Now for me, my love for Rosemary seems to be stronger than my love for God. I know I should love God more than *anything* else, or *anyone* else, but it's hard. I love Rosemary more because ... she's there beside me. I can touch her, and laugh with her. God seems much more remote. That worries me sometimes.

NIGEL: Don't let it worry you. Don't forget that when you love someone really special you are really loving God through them.

BRUCE: I don't get that.

NIGEL: Well God created Rosemary and she has certain qualities that came from God. You have a lot in common with her but there are also many differences. And you love her for that. She laughs much more than you do and you enjoy her laughter. Inasmuch as you love Rosemary you are loving God. But you don't worship her. That would make your desire for her stop right there and it wouldn't be translated into a love for God.

BRUCE: I used to tell her that I worshipped the ground she walked on.

NIGEL: That's different. Young love generally goes to extremes and you say all sorts of silly things when you're first discovering each other. But you don't *really* adore her as one might adore an idol.

BRUCE: That's true. Sometimes she really infuriates me.

NIGEL: But you still love her, right?

BRUCE: Of course.

NIGEL: Her good points, and I'm sure she has many, are aspects of God's personality. When you think you're admiring *her* you're also admiring God who created her, even if you aren't aware of it at the time.

BRUCE: So is that why we promise to love and honour our partner 'until death us do part'?

NIGEL: Yes. In this world we can glimpse God through people we meet, and especially through our life's partner. But *then* we shall see God face to face and experience the whole of his Person.

BRUCE: So I won't see Rosemary in Heaven?

NIGEL: We don't know the details of eternal life. I would expect that you *would* because she's become part of who you are. But look, they're just ending Act I so we'd better join the others for drinks in the interval.

They walk out.

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

SCENE: *Church*

JAMES: I'm glad you were able to come to my church this Sunday. I didn't realise that it was so early. The service doesn't start for another fifteen minutes. I suppose I could spend the time in silent prayer.

TOM: Oh, you can speak to God any time. You've got me to talk to now.

JAMES: I suppose so. Are you going to the Spring Fair next Saturday?

TOM: Probably – that is, provided we have fair weather that day. Hey, do you think that's why they call it a 'fair'? Perhaps God says, "I'd better not make it rain on Saturday because of the Spring Fair, so forecast will be fair weather!"

JAMES: They might call it a 'fair' the organisers don't want to be accused of going over the top with their advertising. If they called it a Spring Poor nobody would come and if they called it a Spring Excellent they might be criticised if it didn't come up to expectations. Better to call it a Spring Fair.

TOM: You're not serious are you?

JAMES: Of course not, but when you think about it there are so many different meanings of the word 'fair'.

TOM: That's true. I don't suppose My Fair Lady meant she was just mediocre. If you call a lady 'fair' you usually mean she's quite pretty – not just average.

JAMES: Or it could mean that she has light-coloured hair. 'Fair' is the opposite to "dark".

TOM: And 'fare' is what you pay when you get on a bus.

JAMES: Ha! ha! Let's be fair and just stick to F-A-I-R. There's the 'fair' in the word "fairway" on a golf course.

TOM: I think that got its name because somebody once asked how far that long bit of grass goes and they were told "Oh, it goes a fair way".

JAMES: I've just Googled 'fair' and come up with Fair Trading.

TOM: Yes that sort of fairness is probably the most common meaning. We all want fair play. God should have created the world so that everything is fair. But there's so much

unfairness around these days. Even sport, which was once considered to be fair, is riddled with unfair practices.

JAMES: Parents are supposed to be fair to their children, but no – even they have their favourites.

TOM: I would have thought that your parents are pretty fair. They're wonderful people.

JAMES: You'd think so wouldn't you? But they aren't. You remember my sister Betty?

TOM: Oh she was the wild one, wasn't she? She ran off with some guy and got herself pregnant.

JAMES: She was on drugs, and she used to steal from Mum and Dad. She even stole my gold watch and pawned it. Then she went off one day with her drug dealer boyfriend. Of course she got pregnant, didn't she? And naturally he didn't marry her. After two years he dumped her, leaving her with two little girls. I think the boyfriend went off overseas. She certainly couldn't get any money out of him.

TOM: Oh the poor girl!

JAMES: What do you mean by "poor girl"? She knew what she was doing. If people make bad choices in life they have to suffer the consequences.

TOM: How did she cope?

JAMES: Well somehow she got off the drugs. She had to, with two little girls to look after. She got a job as a barmaid and got a prostitute friend to look after the girls. Luckily the working day for a prostitute doesn't start until the pubs have closed.

TOM: Well, what has this got to do with fairness?

JAMES: At first Mum and Dad had no idea where she was living, but when they tracked her down they started sending her money to help out.

TOM: And ...

JAMES: Well, I was having to pay board to Mum and Dad while they were paying her an allowance.

TOM: But you were thirty and had a good job. Don't you think you *should* be paying board?

JAMES: Not if it was my money that was going to Betty to prop up her sinful life. To make matters worse, she lost her job and wrote to my folks to ask if she could come home. She

said she didn't want to come home as a daughter, but she could work for them as a cleaner, and cook their meals. She said she could sleep in the old caravan in the backyard. But of course they wouldn't hear of it.

TOM: You mean they wouldn't accept her back?

JAMES: Oh they accepted her back alright. But they said that they didn't want her as a servant. She could help out, of course, if she had time with looking after her girls but there would be no formal arrangement. She was accepted back as a daughter, not as a servant.

TOM: So she didn't have to pay rent for the old caravan.

JAMES: Oh, no. Mum and dad insisted on her living in the house. So I got kicked out.

TOM: I see what you mean. That doesn't seem fair. Why that old caravan would be pretty cold in the winter.

JAMES: Oh, I still kept my bedroom. But I used to have a second room that I used to store all my stuff. Well the girls got moved in there and so I had to move my stuff out into the caravan. It just isn't fair. Mum and Dad were over the moon about Betty and her girls coming home they put on a big party. Talk about the fatted calf. It's just like that story in the Bible.

TOM: But why shouldn't your parents be happy to have Betty come back home, especially as she'd settled down and was no longer on drugs.

JAMES: But what did *I* get? I'm the one who's always gone to church. I never went on drugs. I never ran off and lived with a no-hoper. I've never got a girl pregnant. And all the girls I've dated over the years have been good church girls. But did I get a big party for staying at home? Noo ... Did I get a reduction in my board for having to move my things out to the caravan? Noo...

TOM: So how much do you pay your folks, if you don't mind me asking?

JAMES: A hundred dollars a week. I know it's not a lot, but it's the principal of the thing. I mean fair is fair.

TOM: What about their will. Do you think everything will go to your sister?

JAMES: No, they say they're leaving everything fifty-fifty. But they also say they have the right to be more generous to Betty because of her need. Never mind that the reason why she has a need is because of her bad choices.

TOM: Has she thrown off her old life?

JAMES: More or less. She now goes to church, but that's probably just to keep in good with Mum and Dad. And she keeps up with that prostitute friend who used to babysit for her. She's even got her to come to church with her.

TOM: And your parents are OK with that?

JAMES: Oh yes, they even invite her to our house for meals. I try to be out when she comes. A good Christian shouldn't mix with low life. We have to remain pure. But when Betty got the girls christened I couldn't run away. Would you believe it? Betty chose *her* to be godmother and *me* to be godfather. So I had to stand up in front of our church next to an ex-prostitute. It was *so* embarrassing.

TOM: You say "ex-prostitute". Is she no longer "on the game"?

JAMES: No, Dad got her a legit job. But once a prostitute, always a prostitute I say.

TOM: Well, if you think your parents weren't fair, let me tell you about something that happened to my cousin when he went fruit-picking out Orange way. He heard about this job picking cherries.

JAMES: Shouldn't that be "oranges"?

TOM: No, they were cherries. Anyway the ad said "\$160 per day from 8am till 4pm." That sounded like good money – twenty dollars an hour. So Bob signed up. After he'd been working in the hot sun for four hours these two guys came up, asking for a job. The farmer agreed to take them on, but get this. He offered to pay them \$160 for what was left of the day. Now that's what I call grossly unfair.

JAMES: But your cousin thought he was getting good money. So why should he be dissatisfied just because someone else is doing even better? That's how the capitalist system works. But what gets my goat is our tax system. The more you earn, not only do you pay more tax but you pay a higher *rate* of tax. I think we should all pay the same tax, irrespective of what we earn.

TOM: You mean a flat tax, like 20 cents in the dollar?

JAMES: No I mean we should all pay the same dollar amount, like ten thousand dollars a year.

TOM: But some people don't even earn that much!

JAMES: Well, they should get a job which pays enough for them to be able to pay that ten thousand dollars a year. I mean imagine if at the supermarket those of us who earn more had to pay more for our groceries. What if our Opal Card was linked to the Tax Office and the

amount charged for each journey was a certain percentage of our income! Would that be fair?

TOM: But taxation is based upon need and ability to pay. The world is inherently unfair. Some of us lack the ability to get good jobs. Some of us are disabled and can't work at all. Taxation is a way of making things a little less unfair.

JAMES: I guess. But last week's reading in our church was the parable of the talents? You probably had it too. The rich man goes off into a far country, and before he leaves he gives ten thousand dollars to each of his three investment bankers. The first is prudent and puts it in a Westpac account at 2 per cent interest. The second is a bit more adventurous and invests in shares. The third goes to Randwick and puts it all on High Jinx at twenty to one, and the horse wins.

When the rich man returns after a year the first banker says, "I knew you were a hard man and would be unhappy if you made a loss so I put your money into a Westpac account at 2 percent. So after deducting my management fees here's the balance of nine thousand and twenty dollars.

The second banker says "the ASX did well this year and, after management fees, here's eleven thousand dollars". The third banker says "You did well, thanks to me. High Jinx came in at twenty to one. So here is your ten thousand dollars, plus another hundred thousand."

"Shouldn't it be more than that?" asks the rich man. The third banker says "I put some of the winnings on the next race and lost it – still, you didn't do too badly."

TOM: I don't quite remember it sounding like that. Which version are you quoting from?

JAMES: My own. But what I don't get is that it's the one who, by a fluke, made the most money is the one who is rewarded. That doesn't seem fair.

TOM: Getting back to your sister Betty, I don't think I've met her. Is she a good looker?

JAMES: That's her sitting over near the window with her girl-friend. Betty's the one with the fair hair.

TOM: How come you're not sitting with your sister?

JAMES: What, and have to sit next to her ex-prostitute friend?

TOM: I don't think you're being fair to either of them. Hmm that friend is fairly good-looking but Betty is a fair stunner. You'll have to introduce her to me after the service.

JAMES: Shh! The minister's about to start the service.

WAITING FOR THE 545

SCENE: *Bus shelter. Anthony already seated, reading a book. Mark enters.*

MARK: Hi there. Mind if I join you?

ANTHONY: Good to see you.

MARK: Hope I'm not interrupting important reading.

ANTHONY: It's OK – this is a book about trivia in the Bible.

MARK: I thought the Bible was about important things, not trivia.

ANTHONY: This is about little-known facts in the Bible.

MARK: Such as?

ANTHONY: Well, do you know how many verses in the Bible are about prayer?

MARK: No

ANTHONY: About 500. And how many verses speak about money?

MARK: 250?

ANTHONY: No. Over 2000

MARK: Wow! I wonder why Jesus was so obsessed with economics.

ANTHONY: What do you mean?

MARK: Well, there's all that investment advice about storing your treasure where moth and rust can't get to it.

ANTHONY: He was only using that as a metaphor. The treasure he was talking about was

MARK: Oh, I know all about that but so many of his parables are about money.

ANTHONY: That's what people are interested in

ANTHONY: You mean the lost coin?

MARK: Like parable of the talents. Jesus had it in for that guy who just buried the investment in a non-interest bearing account.

ANTHONY: Yes, while the others took a risk and increased their master's money.

MARK: But wouldn't they have been in trouble if the investment had gone bad? It's all very well to put your own money in some risky investment that promises to double your money but you shouldn't risk someone else's money.

ANTHONY: But again Jesus was using money as a metaphor. He was talking about God's gift of talents. If you have a gift for music perhaps you should get lessons instead of letting that talent go to waste. I remember someone boasting that they would have been a great pianist if only they'd had lessons!

MARK: Then there's the parable of the sower we had in our church last month. Some seed fell on bad soil and didn't grow while other seed fell on good soil and had a profitable yield.

ANTHONY: Yes, Jesus explained that parable. The seed is God's word and the sower is the Lord. We are the soil, and some of us are unresponsive.

MARK: But I think Jesus got it wrong.

ANTHONY: That's an interesting call. How could he? I guess he was a carpenter, not a farmer. But it was still *his* parable.

MARK: But don't you think that the sower was pretty careless in tossing the seed all about? Surely Jesus wouldn't be that careless.

ANTHONY: I think it's simply a scattergun approach – all very random. Perhaps it's a bit like God raining on both the just and the unjust. Everyone gets the same opportunity to receive God's word – the unreceptive as well as the receptive.

MARK: Well maybe that's one interpretation, but I like to think that the sower is me and you on a mission to spread God's word. Like a wise farmer we should be careful where we sow. It only makes sense to sow the seed in good soil. The church should focus its mission on those who are most likely to respond.

ANTHONY: Perhaps a good carpenter doesn't make a wise farmer

MARK: Come on, you know what I mean!

ANTHONY: So you think the church ought to be much more targeted with its mission? So that you spend time and energy where there is likely to be the most productive outcomes.

MARK: Yes

ANTHONY: So you won't be the one putting up your hand to teach SRE with the Year 8 students at the local high school then? And what about prison chaplains? Do you think they would be better off deployed in preaching to the almost converted?

MARK: Maybe. At any rate our mission should be towards the waverers rather than those who've rejected or ignored God. We put so much effort into getting *new* people into our churches without noticing that some of our own people are getting frustrated or upset and are likely to leave the church. It's a bit like trying to fill up a sieve.

ANTHONY: At my church they have Elders to look after the church's own people, and our minister is always banging on about Matthew 28 – go and make disciples.

MARK: But not at the cost of neglecting those who are already part of the church.

ANTHONY: So let me see if I've got this right: you're saying we should never try to reach out to those beyond our own community. It might seem to be a good idea to focus on those who are receptive to the gospel. But remember God doesn't work that way. God sometimes chose the most unlikely people. Look at St Paul for example.

MARK: But we're not God. If we only have limited resources we should give some thought as to who we target. We shouldn't throw the seed about carelessly.

ANTHONY: But that's what Jesus teaches.

MARK: And I think Jesus may have been wrong.

ANTHONY: OK – let's say Jesus was wrong. And we do what you suggest, and scatter seed only among responsive ground, with responsive people. Where do you find responsive people? People don't go around with a placard "Receptive to God's Word".

MARK: Why not go around to other churches? There would be a lot of receptive people there!

ANTHONY: So you're saying we should infiltrate other churches in the area and try to persuade people to come to our church? I don't believe it! Jesus said "*make* disciples", not *take* disciples.

MARK: Well wouldn't it make things easier. Those people already have the foundations laid. We'd just have to show them that we do things better than their own churches.

ANTHONY: But that would be outlandish – poaching people from other churches.

MARK: But if we preach a more powerful message, or have better hymns why shouldn't we advertise the fact? If a telephone company comes knocking on my door and tries to offer me a better deal by switching providers I might not be interested. But nobody would think it terribly wrong. It's just healthy competition. Why is the church any different?

ANTHONY: Next thing you'll be telling me that we can advertise that if you switch to our church you won't have to put any money in the plate for the first three months!

MARK: You always come up with such great ideas!

ANTHONY: Our church marketing team would have great fun. Come to our Church – instead of 10 commandments, we can have only seven, and it's your choice which seven.

MARK: Now you're on the money. That's the way to attract people to the church.

ANTHONY: I wasn't serious. Anyway our mission isn't simply to increase our size at all costs. Our mission is to reach out to those who haven't heard God's word.

MARK: Do you think that there's anyone in Australia who hasn't heard about God?

ANTHONY: Sometimes I think everyone has. When you watch TV shows all the people say "Oh my God".

MARK: You know what I mean!

ANTHONY: Well perhaps our mission is to those who might have heard the gospel but haven't acted upon it. People who go to other churches are already actively seeking God.

MARK: Well every church has its waverers. If we *infiltrate* and keep our ear to the ground we might become aware of some whose faith is going cold. Rather than have them leave the church completely we could *grab* them into our own community. You see the parable of the sower instructs us to focus on the soil that has already been prepared and is fertilised rather than on the stony ground. It's a question of efficiency.

ANTHONY: So you think that we should send out little teams into other churches to be ready to pounce on those who drift away.

MARK: Well, we couldn't be accused of proselytising if we waited till they actually left that other church.

ANTHONY: I still don't think it is a good idea to interfere in other people's churches. But perhaps what you say about preventative medicine in our own community is worth considering. We mustn't let our enthusiasm for reaching out to interfere with giving real

support to those within our community. I suppose it's too easy to assume that those we have will always be with us.

MARK: Yes, we could have a forum in which we allowed people to whinge about concerns they might have in the life of our church.

ANTHONY: But wouldn't a whinging session detract from the positive outlook we're trying to foster? If people don't like something in our church they have the opportunity to speak to their Elder, or at a congregational meeting.

MARK: But many people aren't like that. It's so much easier to vote with one's feet. Somehow we need to be aware of what our people are really thinking. Often the first we hear about a problem, or a perceived problem, is when someone stops coming.

ANTHONY: So you think we don't really need to market our message to the wider community?

MARK: Well if we concentrated our efforts on making sure our worship experience is a quality product we wouldn't need to do much outreach. As they say, if you build a better mousetrap the world will beat a path to your door. You wouldn't need to spend a lot of effort in advertising.

ANTHONY: And would you be the one who defines 'quality product'.

MARK: Maybe!

ANTHONY: The trouble is that in today's world the church gets such a bad press. People don't walk through our doors because they think they know what church is like but they're quite wrong. They think we're a bunch of pious fuddy duddies whose message is full of "Thou Shalt Nots". Or that we are a group of people who simply like things done the way they always have been. We have to go out into the world to show that we're not like that before we can expect to get them to come inside our church.

MARK: Well, maybe you're right. There's a lot of interest out there in spirituality and ethics. I suppose there might be many who don't go to other churches who might be responsive to God's Word.

ANTHONY: But you might have something too when you say that we shouldn't be so preoccupied with "reaching out" that we neglect our own community. I guess it all comes down to balance. But do you still think we should focus on poaching from other Christian communities?

MARK: No, I just said that to get you going.

ANTHONY: And if Jesus was alive today I suppose you think he'd be an economist?

MARK: No, probably he'd be a trade union leader. After all, didn't he say that we should all get the same pay no matter how many hours in the day we work?

MARK: Well, what do you think the parable of the sower really means?

ANTHONY: I think it emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelism. You know we sometimes get depressed when we try to spread the word and nobody responds. I think Jesus is saying that we should be sensitive to the spiritual awareness of people around us. The Holy Spirit prepares the ground and a word in season is all it needs. Getting up in Eastwood plaza and rattling on about Jesus may not be the best approach to evangelism.

MARK: I get it. We should look out for opportunities to sow the seed rather than use the scatter-gun approach.

ANTHONY: That's right. Wait till the Holy Spirit has prepared the ground. But pray for guidance as to where the opportunities lie. Too many people think evangelism is a game, where you keep score. I think it's more about loving people you come into contact with and sowing the word comes naturally – in context.

MARK: That sounds the most economical way of dealing with it. I'm sure Jesus was very economical. I bet he saved his off-cuts to use in other jobs. Yes he was an economist as well as a carpenter. I wonder if there were any economists in the Old Testament?

ANTHONY: What about Noah? He floated his stock while the rest of the world went into liquidation!

FACE TO FACE

SCENE: *A café. A long table lies across the stage, with a chair at each end. Charles and Sonia sit at either end of the table, wearing Covid masks. They use antibacterial gel to disinfect their hands. A waiter comes up with a tape-measure and checks that they are more than 1.5 metres apart, and nods in approval. They take off their masks.*

CHARLES: Sonia, I'm really pleased that the Covid restrictions have been lifted a little and we can get together for coffee like we used to – subject to social distancing and disinfecting our hands of course.

SONIA: Yes Charles, I'm so glad to be able to get out of the house and meet people face to face.

CHARLES: Didn't the apostle Paul say something like this?
Once we saw through a glass darkly, but now we see each other face to face.

SONIA: If it seemed like it was through a glass darkly you probably need to adjust the brightness on your laptop. But talking about ZOOM, how have you coped with that App?

CHARLES: Well I tuned into another church, who were using ZOOM for their services, and it's certainly better than nothing. But it'll be so good when we get to see our old friends in the flesh.

SONIA: As you know, here at Eastwood, we had the services up on YouTube. How did ZOOM work at that other church?

CHARLES: Well, as people arrive you can see their faces in tiny little windows. Then there's a cacophony of voices as people say, "Hi Jean", "Hello Tom". Imagine seventy people just greeting each other like that. That's nearly 5,000 possible greetings. It's so weird. After about ten minutes of this, the minister shuts us up and starts the service. You can see all the faces, in the little windows, sitting at their laptops. You can see who falls asleep during the sermon, or who gets up to make coffee. And often there are other people in the family flitting past in the background.

SONIA: Properly dressed, I hope!

CHARLES: Oh, yes. But you can switch to Speaker View and just see the minister, or whoever is doing the bible reading or prayer.

SONIA: How did they cope with the hymns?

CHARLES: That worked really well. There was a video of some choir singing, and the words would come up on the screen. You could sing your heart out because we were all muted.

SONIA: Sounds fun.

CHARLES: It was a novelty, but I'm *so* looking forward to getting back to normal services, and seeing my friends face to face.

SONIA: Did you get a chance to make friends with anyone at that church?

CHARLES: Well, when the service is finished, those who want to stay for a chat are split up into chat rooms of 6 to 8 people. We talk, and they're very friendly, and accept me as an outsider, never having met them in real life. But I don't really feel any link of friendship – it just seems too artificial. Now that churches are re-opening I'll reconnect with those whom I've got to know over the years at Eastwood. I feel like my ZOOM friends are just like faces I see on TV shows – like actors.

SONIA: One of my friends did ZOOM church and she said that this is the way to go in the future. We should sell our churches and replace them with hi-tech studios. All our services from now on should be virtual. Think of the benefit to the shut-ins.

CHARLES: Well, I agree that those who are too frail to come to church have benefitted from the lockdown. Maybe we should do something that includes them in the future. However our Faith isn't at all suited to a virtual operation.

SONIA: But they say that schools of the future might become virtual. Think of the efficiency, where one teacher can teach thousands of kids all at once. A virtual church would be able to tap into the very best preachers. We wouldn't need our own. Pastoral care could be done on-line. I mean we've even got doctors doing e-consultations. Don't forget that our Faith is a spiritual one. My friend says we don't need any physical contact.

CHARLES: That's an interesting thought. I guess it *is* true that the early pagan religions required the material presence of their god. He was made of stone, or precious metals. Then we discovered that God was up there, invisible, but still located physically in our world. And then finally we learnt that God was a spirit, a virtual being.

SONIA: But I don't agree with my friend. I mean, the physical and material aspects of our Faith are right throughout the Bible.

CHARLES: Yes, you're right. The phrase 'breath of God' was there right back in Genesis. And the Church is the Body of Christ. Bodies play an important role in our Faith. Remember, God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and performed the world's first mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

SONIA: And wasn't it Jacob who wrestled with God? They didn't keep social distancing in those days. I recently saw a cartoon where Moses can only fit ten commandments onto the two slabs of stone. "But I've still got a few more," he says to the stonemason in dismay. "Number 11: Keep at least three cubits from thy neighbour."

CHARLES: And then ... wham ... just as the Jews were learning that God is a spiritual being, he sends Jesus slap into our material world. He sweated, as he worked. Probably he developed callouses on his hands as a result of his carpentry. He touched people. He ate and drank with people and made friends on a one-to-one, face-to-face basis. There's nothing virtual in that.

SONIA: But when he rose and departed, he left behind the Holy Spirit. She's a virtual presence.

CHARLES: Interesting that you should say "she". I once saw a film called *The Shack* where the Holy Spirit was depicted as a young Asian woman.

SONIA: Oh yes, I saw that film. It really made me think. Wasn't God played by Whoopi Goldberg?

CHARLES: I think so. But remember how Jesus introduced the disciples to the Holy Ghost. He gathered them together and he *breathed* on them.

SONIA: It's a good thing there was no Covid-19 in those days. It might not have worked if he was wearing a mask! But didn't Jesus heal in a virtual way, without making physical contact?

CHARLES: Sometimes he did it that way – just said a few words and the afflicted person was healed. "Come out you evil spirits," he commanded and they obeyed him and dived into the nearest pigs to escape. Sometimes he healed remotely. "Go back to your daughter. You'll find that she's healed." I suppose that could be called virtual healing. But sometimes he put his hand upon the afflicted one.

SONIA: Yes, I remember. When he healed that blind man, he took some earth and spat on it. He made a paste of it and plastered it all over the man's eyes. When the man later washed it off, he found that he could see. You can't get any more physical contact than that.

CHARLES: That's right. On another occasion Jesus cured a man who was deaf and dumb by spitting into onto his own fingers and then putting his fingers onto the man's tongue. He couldn't have done that as an e-consultation!

SONIA: Remember when he met his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee? They thought he was a ghost, and he assured them he was real. "I'm no ghost," he said.

CHARLES: Yes, and then he said, “hey guys, what’s for breakfast?” And he ate breakfast with them. There’s nothing virtual or spiritual about that. And didn’t he get doubting Thomas to stick his fingers right into his wounds?

SONIA: He certainly invited Thomas to do just that. But it isn’t quite clear that Thomas actually did so. He said, “my Lord and Master”. But was it because he felt he no longer needed to take Jesus up on his invitation? It’s interesting, the Catholics believe that Thomas actually put his hands into Jesus’s side while we Protestants believe that, in the end, Thomas believed without needing to touch Jesus. The jury’s out on that one.

CHARLES: The Protestant Church has downplayed the earthy, physical, aspects of our Faith. But in some ways they were quite justified weren’t they?

SONIA: Oh yes, back in the middle ages the business of relics was getting out of hand. How many tons of steel nails were floating around – all having come from the true cross. Not to mention dozens of holy grails. Do you remember the story that Martin Luther told of a baker in the middle ages who returned from Rome, having bought a mummified leg from the *very* donkey that Jesus rode on, into Jerusalem. His four friends each said to him, “Oh, I bought one of those when I went to Rome last year.” Whereupon the baker exclaimed, “it’s a miracle – Jesus rode a five-legged donkey!”

CHARLES: And the Catholics teach that, in the mass, the bread gets magically transformed into the actual body of Jesus, and the wine becomes real blood – the blood that actually flowed through the veins of our Lord. I don’t understand this. I doubt if you could recover the DNA of Jesus, once the wine had been blessed. And, if you were to calculate the total weight of all the wafers that have ever been blessed over the years, Jesus must have been quite overweight!

SONIA: I once heard that somebody, as the wafer was about to be placed on his tongue, asked if he could have a different one – “I’d like a piece of the heart”. But my cousin once asked his priest whether the wafers were truly the body and blood of Jesus, in a chemical sense. The priest smiled and said, “oh, well ...”. He didn’t actually contradict the official teaching, but it was obvious that he didn’t believe it himself. He covered up his embarrassment by going on to the way that, in the Eucharist, we’re taking the very essence of Jesus into our hearts.

CHARLES: I think the Catholics might be on to something. Of course, I don’t believe that the elements are literally flesh and blood, but I somehow feel that we Protestants are missing out on something by focussing on the “this do in remembrance of me”. There’s more than just a remembering. I feel that something mysterious *does* happen in the Catholic Eucharist, and even in our Communion – something beyond pure remembrance. It’s not a literal act of cannibalism, but somehow we *are* taking in the essence of Jesus into our hearts as we eat the

bread and drink the wine. I think that the Lord's Supper lies somewhere between just an analogy and literal transubstantiation. I just can't put my finger on it.

SONIA: I think I see what you mean. Transubstantiation is a myth, but it's a very powerful sort of myth that changes lives.

CHARLES: So, are you saying that we should embrace that myth in the Uniting Church?

SONIA: No, I don't think we have to do anything different in our communion services. But we *do* need to be constantly reminded of the deep significance of the sacrament. It's more than just a memorial.

CHARLES: We still retain some physical touching in our churches today. Well, they've been suspended for Covid, but I sincerely hope that they'll be reinstated when things get back to normal.

SONIA: Such as?

CHARLES: Well, the Passing Of The Peace, for example. I've always felt that this is an important part of our worship. I know that it takes time, and often degenerates into a general chit-chat that should wait till after church. Some people say that it makes the service too long, but we *could* shorten our sermons.

SONIA: I agree. But I think we should limit it to, say, at most five people each. And we should be reminded that we're only to speak the words "The Peace Of The Lord Be With You" and "Also With You". Things such as "Did you see the *Game of Thrones* last night?" or "Can you do the flowers in church next week?" should wait until after the service.

CHARLES: When this is all over, I hope we don't continue to insist on the 1.5 metres. Close contact is to be avoided at the moment, but we should get away from the thought that it's intrinsically unhygienic.

SONIA: Yes, I heard that children from large families, or who come into close contact with other children, develop fewer allergies than those who are kept cocooned.

CHARLES: But on the other hand there have been some practices that have grown up during Covid that ought to continue.

SONIA: Like what?

CHARLES: Some people are putting boxes of seedlings on their front fence, with a sign "FREE". And another family put a box of free origami that their children had made. This is to encourage people to walk around their community more.

SONIA: Yes, and there are those street libraries. And people are ringing each other up more often. Isolation has been a pain, but I hope, when it's all over, we hang on to some of the good things that it's brought about. A sort of best-of-both-worlds phenomenon.

CHARLES: What about our life after death? Physical or virtual?

SONIA: I forget where he said this, but didn't Paul make it clear that our own resurrection will be a resurrection of the body.

CHARLES: Not my arthritic body, with my gammy knee, I hope.

SONIA: No, I imagine that it'll be a *new* body – what it will be like I can't imagine. But we won't be just amorphous spirits merging into one another. We will, in some sense, have bodies and retain our individuality. Perhaps, in heaven, we'll still be able to hug one another.

CHARLES: I hope so. In this life, touching can be a great healer. We come across somebody in tears and we're motivated to put our arms around them. It's a shame that teachers can no longer do this with little children when they fall over in the playground. Child abuse has sensitised us to consider that it's inappropriate for a teacher to touch a child. But we've lost something in the process.

SONIA: (*looking at her watch*): Sorry, I've got to go now.

CHARLES: Nice to have seen you again. Perhaps next time it will be safe to shake hands.

SONIA: Or even give each other a hug.

CHARLES: Or maybe, as the French are in the habit of doing, ...

SONIA: I think that might be going a bit far! We're not French, you know!

They get up, put their masks back on, touch elbows and leave in different directions.

TABLE TALK

SCENE: *Martin Luther's kitchen table*

This is based on Martin Luther's book: Table Talk, which is a collection of some of the things that he said in his many sermons, as well as little stories that he told his guests around a meal table. I have used the English translation by William Hazlitt, but I've taken the liberty of updating the language a little. However, I haven't added anything of substance. It's essentially all Martin Luther.

In this little drama, as well as Luther himself, there is his wife, Kate, and a visitor, Shane. Shane is a reporter from the Bennelong Times who has somehow managed to go back about five hundred years to interview the great professor. The year is 1525.

SHANE: It's so kind of you, Doctor Luther, to invite me to share your table for a meal. I have admired you ever since I heard that you posted up those ninety-five theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg.

MARTIN: Well, that story might be a little bit of imagination. But I *did* circulate them throughout Europe with the help of Gutenberg's invention. The printing press is the best invention since...toast. If only someone could invent sliced bread, that would be the best thing ever. Anyway, welcome to my humble home. This is my wife and helpmate, Kate.

KATE: Pleased to meet you. I believe that you come from a long way away.

SHANE: Yes, I have travelled a distance of five hundred years, plus several thousand miles. I'm from a place called Australia.

KATE: Never heard of it. Is that one of the new lands that Christopher Columbus discovered recently?

SHANE: No. That's America. Australia is very different to America. (*Pause*) Except that the person with the largest Gutenberg-type printing press seems to have great influence in both countries.

KATE: What's that you are clutching? Would you like to put it down on the table?

SHANE: These? Oh yes, I have brought you a gift of ripe cherries from the world I come from. May I suggest that you hang them over the table during our meal, in remembrance of the Creation. We can praise God for creating such fruits.

MARTIN: Why not rather praise God for the gift of children. These are the fruit of one's own body? For these are far more excelling creatures of God than all the fruits of trees. In

them we see God's power, wisdom and art. God made them all out of nothing, gave them life and limbs, exquisitely constructed, and he will maintain and preserve them. Yet how little do we regard this. When people have children, all they can think about is raking together all the money they can, to leave behind for their children to inherit. They don't know that, before a child comes into the world, it has its lot assigned already, and that it is ordained and determined what and how much it shall have. In the married state we find that the conception of children depends not on our will and pleasure; we never know whether we will be fruitful or not, or whether God will give us a son or a daughter. All this goes on without our counsel. My father and mother didn't imagine that they should have brought a spiritual overseer into the world. It is God's work only, and this we can't enter into. I believe that, in the life to come, we shall have nothing to do, but to meditate on and marvel at our Creator and his creatures.

SHANE: I gather you have children of your own. So Doctor Luther, how long have you and Kate been married?

KATE: We will have been married twenty years next month. I used to be a nun, but I became disillusioned. However I wasn't allowed to leave the convent. There were twelve of us who wanted to escape and Martin managed to smuggle us out of the convent. He went to the local Cooper to have twelve herring barrels made. We each hid in one of these barrels and Martin arranged for the supposedly empty barrels to be transported out of the convent! Two years later, we were married. And it's been a barrel of fun ever since.

MARTIN: Yes, suddenly, and while I was occupied with far different thoughts, the Lord plunged me into marriage.

KATE: I was 26 years old when we married, and Martin was 41.

SHANE: And how many children do you have?

KATE: God has blessed us with six children, though Elizabeth died as a baby. And Magdalene died just a couple of years ago, so we only have four now.

MARTIN: Twenty years is but a short time, yet in that short time the world would become empty, if there was no marrying and production of children. God assembles unto himself a Christian Church out of little children. For I believe that, when a little child dies at one year old, or younger, as did our Elizabeth, two thousand will die with it – that is, in that year there will be two thousand in this city, of that age or younger, who will have died. But when I, Luther, die, I believe that a hundred at the most, will die with me of that age, or older; for people now don't grow old. Not many people live to my years. Mankind is nothing else but a sheep-shambles, where we are slain and slaughtered by the devil. How many sorts of deaths are in our bodies? Nothing is therein but death.

KATE: Please excuse Martin. He's getting to be a grumpy old man these days!

SHANE: Moving along ... the thing that most people of my day think of when they hear the name Martin Luther, is that you spoke out against indulgences. We don't have such things so perhaps, for the benefit of my readers, you could tell us what they were and why you thought them to be so wrong.

MARTIN: Where do I start? An indulgence was like a ticket that, for a certain sum of money, was supposed to forgive certain sins and so reduce the time a person would have to spend in purgatory. Three crowns could take a whole week off. But of course it was just a trick to take money from the poor and stuff it into the coffers of the church. So, for a start, it was a practice that exploited the ordinary people. It was making money from the sincere penitence of the humble sinner so that the Church could become even richer. Remember that these sorts of things went on in the time of our Lord. He overturned the money tables at the temple. My vision for the church is that it should shun having extravagant wealth, and instead focus on the needs of the people. I presume that over the next five hundred years the church has become more of a servant and less of a master.

SHANE: Well, we no longer sell indulgences or relics – not even the Bishop of Rome approves of such practices. But I must admit we still have some way to go before the Church sheds herself of excessive wealth.

MARTIN: That's a shame. Well, my second reason for condemning indulgences and relics is that they give people the impression that they can buy their way into heaven. Faith is all one needs – God does the rest.

SHANE: But what about the relics? To have in one's possession a nail from the true cross must have been a powerful devotional tool for the faithful. And I can understand why they must be expensive. There were only so many such nails and so it stands to reason that they would be somewhat pricey – the law of supply and demand.

MARTIN: I've never heard of such a law. Is it something that your emperor has decreed?

SHANE: It's something like a law of nature. And, no, we don't have an emperor in Australia. We have a constitutional monarchy. Henry VIII and all that. You know, the man with the wives and the monasteries.

MARTIN: I hope there weren't too many like him.

SHANE: No, There have been a few Georges, a Victoria, two Elizabeths, and a couple of Charlies.

KATE: Martin dear, tell Shane about Leopold.

MARTIN: Oh yes, you see Leopold went to Rome to make his confession. In the course of the confession the priest told Leopold that he had a leg of the very ass on which Christ rode into Jerusalem. It had been preserved over the centuries and was wrapped in fine silk. The priest said that he could offer it to Leopold as a devotional aid. Of course it was very costly. But he said that he had to remember that the Lord's own legs had rubbed against that ass's leg, as our Lord rode into Jerusalem. Now Leopold was very interested and, being a wealthy merchant, he said that money was no object. But the priest said that the sale was conditional on Leopold promising, on oath, to keep it a secret. So Leopold vowed on the holy ass's leg, to keep it a secret. "I won't even tell my wife," he said. But when he got back to Germany he went to his usual tavern and met up with four of his drinking friends. He had brought the holy relic with him. Although he had promised, on oath, to keep it a secret, he couldn't resist bragging to his companions what he had brought back from Rome. At this one of his companions said that he had also been to Rome and had come back with exactly such a relic. It transpired that all four of them had in their possession one of the legs of the very ass on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Leopold was perplexed. It's a miracle, he declared – an ass that had five legs!

SHANE: I've read that you preach that Bible is the supreme authority for our faith. There is in the Holy Scripture a wisdom so profound, that no man may thoroughly study it or comprehend it.

MARTIN: Ay, we must ever remain scholars here; we cannot sound the depth of one single verse in Scripture; we get hold but of the A, B, C, and that imperfectly. Who can so exalt himself as to comprehend this one line of St Peter: 'Rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings.' Here St Peter would have us rejoice in our deepest misery and trouble, like as a child might kiss the rod that is used by his schoolmaster to chastise him..

SHANE: Sir, what do you say to those who take offence at some of the more down-to-earth passages in the Bible. Shouldn't God's word have been entirely on a lofty plane?

MARTIN: I admonish every pious Christian that he should not take offence at the plain, unvarnished manner of speech of the Bible. Let him reflect that what may seem trivial and vulgar to him, emanates from the high majesty, power, and wisdom of God. The Bible is the book that makes fools of the wise of this world; it is only understood by the plain and simple hearted. Esteem this book as the precious fountain that can never be exhausted. In it you find the swaddling-clothes and the manger where the angels directed the poor, simple shepherds. They seem poor and mean, but dear and precious is the treasure that lies therein.

SHANE: So, how do you know that the Bible is the true word of God?

MARTIN: The Bible is the true word of God I can prove as follows. All things that have been, and are, in the world, and the way in which they were created, are described in the first book of Moses. Countless kings and princes have raged against this book, and tried to destroy it – Alexander the Great, the princes of Egypt and of Babylon, the monarchs of

Persia, of Greece, and of Rome, the emperors Julius and Augustus – but they didn't succeed. Now they have all vanished, while the book remains, and will remain forever and ever, perfect and entire, as it was at the first. And who has protected the Bible against such powerful forces? No one, surely, except God himself. And it is no small miracle how God has for so long preserved and protected this book, for the devil and the world are its enemies. I believe that the devil has destroyed many good books of the church as, in times past, he killed and crushed many holy persons. While the Romish church stood, the Bible was never given to the people in such a form that they could clearly read and understand it, as they now can in the German translation, which, thank God, we have prepared here at Wittenberg.

SHANE: So if the priests should no longer be the ones to explain the Bible to the people, this places the burden on those who write Biblical commentaries.

MARTIN: In all areas of learning, the ablest professors are those who thoroughly know their books. When I was young, I read the Bible over and over and over again, and I knew it so well that, in a moment, I could have located any verse that might be referred to. I then read the commentators, but I soon threw them aside because I found in them so many things my conscience could not approve of, as being contrary to the sacred text. It is always better to see with one's own eyes than with those others.

SHANE: Which do you find the more difficult language from which to translate – The Hebrew Old Testament or the Greek of the New Testament?

MARTIN: Without doubt, Hebrew is the more difficult. The words of the Hebrew tongue have a peculiar energy. It is impossible to convey so much so briefly in any other language. To render them intelligibly, we must not attempt to give word for word, but only aim at the sense and idea. In translating Moses, I made it my effort to avoid Hebraism – it was a difficult business. The wise scholars, who pretend to have greater knowledge than myself on the subject, criticise me for a word here or there. But if they had attempted the labour I have accomplished, I would find a thousand mistakes in their translations for every one in mine.

SHANE: I have another question for you. Since God knew that man would not continue in the state of innocence, why did he create him at all?

MARTIN: (*laughing*) The Lord, all-powerful and magnificent, saw that he should need in his house, sewers and cesspools; be assured he knows quite well what he is about. Even unclean things have their uses. God can make use of the most imperfect of his creatures if he chooses to. Let us keep clear of these abstract questions, and consider the will of God such as it has been revealed unto us.

SHANE: Now sir, I have often been asked why God seems to have made use of so many sinful men. He seems to have gone out of his way to choose flawed men, and made them into heroes.

MARTIN: God is upright, faithful, and true. He has shown this, not only in his promises, through Christ, of forgiveness of sins, but also, in that he has given us, in the Scriptures, many gracious and comforting examples of great and holy saints who of God were highly enlightened and favoured, and who, nevertheless fell into great sin. Adam, by his disobedience, left a legacy of sin and death on all his descendents. David also fell very heavily. Jonah was very upset that Nineveh was not destroyed. Peter denied Christ and, before his conversion, Paul persecuted Christ's followers. These, and many other such examples the Bible describes. Not that we should purposely sin, relying on the mercy of God, but that, when we feel his anger, we should not despair. We may also see by such examples of great holy men falling so badly grievously, what a wicked, crafty, and envious spirit is the devil. God allowed these Godly people, who committed such serious sins, so that they should not be proud or boast themselves of their own gifts and qualities.

SHANE: Is reason to hold no authority at all with Christians, since it is to be set aside in matters of faith?

MARTIN: Before faith and the knowledge of God, reason is mere darkness; but in the hands of those who believe, it is an excellent instrument. All facilities and gifts are pernicious, exercised by the impious; but most salutary when possessed by godly persons.

KATE: Martin dear, I heard your cousin preach this afternoon in the parish church and I understood him better than Dr. Palmer, even though the Doctor is held to be a very excellent preacher.

MARTIN: John Palmer preaches as you women like to talk – whatever comes into your minds, you speak. A preacher ought to remain by the text, and deliver that which he has before him, to the end people may well understand it. But a preacher that will speak everything that comes in his mind, is like a maid that goes to market, and meeting another maid, makes a stand, and they hold together a goods-market.

SHANE: I understand that you consider the popes to be the enemy of the people. We have, at the moment, a very kind and wise pope.

MARTIN: Praise God if the future popes will no longer be servants of Satan as they are in my day, though if I had my way there would no longer be popes. I speak only of what I find. Kings and princes coin money only out of metals, but the pope coins money out of everything – indulgences, ceremonies, dispensations, pardons; it is all fish that comes in to his net. Only baptism escapes him, for children come into the world without clothes to be stolen, or teeth to be drawn.

KATE: Yes, when Wolsey, who was a butcher's son, was made cardinal, a merry fellow said, "I hope he becomes pope one day, for then we shall have meat on fast days. After all St Peter, because he was a fisherman, prohibited meat, just in order to raise the price of fish." But it is not only the pope who sucks all the wealth from the people. Even monks will drain

what little the poor have in order to stuff it into their own pockets. Martin, you must tell our friend the amusing story of the death of Ambrose.

MARTIN: Ha, ha. Yes, an acquaintance of mine, Ambrose by name, was at the point of death when a monk from the nearest monastery came to see what he could pick up. He said to poor Ambrose “Sir, will you give a thousand crowns to our monastery when you go to glory?” The dying man, unable to speak, replied by a nod of the head. Whereupon the monk, turning to the gentleman’s son, said “you see, your father makes us this bequest.” The son said to the father, “father, is it your pleasure that I kick this monk down stairs?” The dying man nodded as before, and the son forthwith drove the monk out of doors.

SHANE: Can I ask what you think eternal life will be like?

MARTIN: No, you can’t ask me that! It’s a deep mystery. When I lay sucking at my mother’s breast, I had no notion how I should afterwards eat, drink, or live. In the same way, we on earth have no idea what the life to come will be like.

KATE: My husband is particularly eloquent on the subject of the majesty of God.

MARTIN: All the works of God are unsearchable and unspeakable, and no human intellect can understand them. Only faith can take hold of them without the power of human reasoning. No mortal creature can comprehend God in his majesty, and therefore he came among us in the simplest manner, and was made man. In all things, in the least of his creatures, God’s almighty power and wonderful works clearly shine. For what man, no matter how powerful, wise and holy, can make a fig-tree out of a single fig, or a cherry-tree out of one cherry-stone, without God’s intervention? Nor can we understand how the eye sees, or how intelligible words are spoken plainly, when only the tongue moves in the mouth. How then should we be able to understand the secrets of God’s majesty, or comprehend them with our human sense, reason, or understanding. Should we then admire our own wisdom? I, for my part, admit I am a fool.

SHANE: Forgive me if I ask your wife what she uses on her skin – she has a wonderful complexion. Back in America we have things called cosmetics that remove wrinkles and nourish the skin, but here ...

KATE: I rub my skin with cow dung every morning. I leave it on for five minutes and then wash it off with cold water.

SHANE: Holy crap! Oh ... sorry!

MARTIN: It’s wonderful how God has put such excellent physic into mere muck. We know by experience that swine’s dung stints the blood; horse manure serves for the pleurisy; man’s excrement heals wounds and black blotches and that of asses is used for the bloody flux, while cow dung is good for epilepsy, or for convulsions of children.

SHANE: I'm not sure that these would be very popular back in Australia. But it does show that God gives us many blessings through the animals that he has created. But why did he create the dangerous wild animals? What purpose does a lion serve to humanity?

MARTIN: Although, because of original sin, many wild beasts hurt mankind, such as lions, wolves, bears, snakes, adders, and so on, yet the merciful God has in such manner mitigated our well-deserved punishments, that there are many more beasts that serve us for our good and profit, than of those which do us hurt. There are many more sheep than wolves, more oxen than lions, lots more cows than bears, more deer than foxes, more lobsters than there are scorpions. In all creatures there are more good than evil, more benefits than hurts and hindrances.

SHANE: I'll think about that next time I see a red-bellied snake, or a funnelweb spider, or a cockroach.

SHANE: I believe that your emperor Charles has protected the church and the monasteries – not like Henry the eighth of England who has taken over the monasteries there.

KATE: The emperor Charles was good in that way, but he has now begun to dissolve the monasteries just like his fellow princes in other lands. Martin preached against his actions and, in so doing, he made up a delightful story to illustrate the point. Tell our guest about the tale of the dog at Linz.

MARTIN: Ah, yes, I saw a dog, at Linz in Austria, that was taught the trick of going to the butcher's shop to buy meat for his master, pushing a small hand cart. On his return he was surrounded by several other dogs who tried to take the meat out of the cart. This clever dog fought strenuously with them. But when he saw they were too strong for him, he grabbed a piece of meat and ate it himself, before all the meat was taken by the other dogs. Our emperor Charles does the same thing. After having protected spiritual benefices for many years, he has seen that every other prince in Europe has taken possession of the monasteries and so he too has seized upon those monasteries within his reach.

SHANE: I have always understood that you're a great story teller. Do you have one more story for my readers?

MARTIN: OK. Here's another merry story that will prepare our stomachs for the meal. A rich merchant, on his death bed, ordered that his remains should be carried to Ratisbon. His friends, knowing that the transport of a corpse incurred a heavy toll, decided to pack the carcass in a barrel of wine, which they then forwarded as ordinary freight. The wagoners, not knowing what was in the barrel, decided to tap into the barrel, and swilled away right joyously, until they found out they had been drinking a pickled corpse!

SHANE: I don't think that this story has left me with a settled stomach. If we have wine with the food I won't be able to forget that story.

KATE: Well, to accompany the food I can offer you some full-bodied Rhenish wine. But I can assure you that when I say 'full-bodied' I don't mean that it has been transported in a barrel along with a corpse!

AN OUTBACK CHRISTMAS PLAY

SCENE: *The scene is a primary school concert, in the little town of Walcha. It is 1950 and the teacher decided that for the end-of-year concert they would perform the Christmas Story from the Bible. She chose Gerry, who was very good with words, to write the script, adapting the Gospel account to suit the Australian countryside. The only stipulation was that he had to use the word 'betrothed' several times but not to let on that it only meant 'engaged'. Gerry does the narration, Mary is played by Josephine.*

GERRY: God sent this angel, called Gabby, to the town of Nazareth Crossing in the highlands, to a young girl called Mary. She was *betrothed* to a man called Joe, whose great, great grandad was a king, called Dave. The angel went up to her and said:

ANGEL: Hi Mary! I hear you're *betrothed* to Joe. Congratulations! I'm here to tell you that God has given you a really important job to do – much more important than being bell monitor."

JOSEPHINE: Gee, I wonder what it could be.

ANGEL: Don't be scared, Mary. God really likes you a lot. You're going to get a baby. That's OK 'cause you're *betrothed*. It'll be a baby boy and you've got to call him Jesus. God says so. He'll grow up and become a king. But unlike George the Sixth, his kingdom will go on for ever and ever, to infinity and beyond."

JOSEPHINE: Hey, how's he going to do that. I'm not even 18.

ANGEL: Don't worry, kid. God will look after all that stuff.

JOSEPHINE: Well I guess if that's what the Lord wants, I'll leave it up to him.

The angel goes off.

JOSEPHINE (*singing*):

I'm so happy. God is so good to me.

He's remembered what I am

Just a poor country girl

Betrothed to Joe.

But now everyone will think I've won the lottery

Because God has done great things for me —

God is his name.

He's kind to those who are scared of him,

To grandkids and great grandkids

He's done great stuff with his strong arms and feet
He's scared off those who are stuck up
He's pushed kings from off their thrones
But he's lifted up the little kids in his arms.
He's put on a great barbecue for the hungry
But he told the rich to get lost.

GERRY: In those days Mr Caesar Augustus made a law that they should count everyone living in the Roman Empire. This was the first time they'd done this for a long time. Everyone went to where they grew up to sign up. So Joe went to a little country town called Bethlehem, near Uralla. He was going to stay in David's house, because that's where he lived when he was a boy. He took Mary, his *betrothed*, and her tummy was already pretty big because she was going to have a baby soon. Well, no sooner did they get to Bethlehem than she started getting these things called contractions. The house of David was all full up, so they had to go round the back to where the horses were put. And it was here where Jesus was born. Mary wrapped the baby up in some horse cloths that they used to put on the backs of horses to keep them warm in winter. Being December though, it was summer, so the horses didn't need them. And, because there was no cot, she had to stick him in the trough where the horses ate from.

Now there were these stockmen who were out in the paddocks just out of town. They'd been rounding up their cattle, mostly Poll Herefords. But now they were sitting down by a campfire while their border collies were making sure that none of the cattle got away. Then an angel suddenly came down out of the sky. Although it was 10 o'clock at night the angel switched on his light and there was this stuff called 'glory' that lit up the whole place. Now, of course they were trembling with fear. They'd never seen anything like this before. But the angel said to them:

ANGEL: Hey guys, don't be so trembly. It's OK! I've got some great news to tell you. This evening, over there in the town, a baby's been born. And he's come straight from God. You'll find this baby all wrapped in some horse cloths and lying in a trough.

GERRY: Suddenly a great army of these angels came riding over the hill, singing this song, over and over.

CHORUS: Glory to God up there. Peace on earth down under.

GERRY: The angels then scooted off and the stockmen looked at each other.

STOCKMAN: How's about if we go into Bethlehem and see what's what?

GERRY: So, they got on their horses and rode off. They found Mary and Joe, and the baby who was lying in the horse trough. Then after they'd gone off to tell everyone what they'd seen, Mary sat down and had a long think.

Josephine sits, with her head in her hands as if she's thinking. Suddenly she stands up.

JOSEPHINE: I've just remembered what betrothed means. It doesn't mean 'married'. She's only Joe's fiancée. I'm playing the part of an unmarried mother. That's *so* embarrassing.

She starts to walk off stage.

JOSEPHINE'S MOTHER (*from the audience*): Now Josephine, don't be silly. Mary in the bible was special and she was allowed to have a baby without being married because she never ... never ... you know ... with Joseph. Oh, go on with the next bit.

Josephine recovers and resumes her place next to Joseph.

GERRY: After this kid called Jesus was born, some very clever aboriginal trackers came to visit the king, all the way from Alice Springs. Their names were Jasper, Barry and Malcolm.

JASPER: Mr Herod, we've heard that a new king has been born. Any idea where he is? We've got some stuff for him as a christening present.

HEROD: Oh dear, I don't know anything about it. I'd better check with my secret police.

A secret policeman comes up and he and Herod have a whispered conference.

HEROD: Apparently there's an old Christmas Carol called 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'. I'm told that's where you should look. (*with a menacing voice*) But if you find him be sure to report back so that I can ... so that I can ... (*he relaxes into a sickly smile*) so that I can ... er ... go and worship him.

GERRY: The three wise trackers went off and found the cottage where the child was now living with his Mum.

Josephine comes out, holding Jesus in her arms. The three trackers bow down before them.

JASPER: Hey little kunga I've got something for you to use when you get bigger. I know I'm supposed to give you gold, but instead here's a pan for panning gold. You'll need an awful lot of gold if you're going to be a king. When you're bigger I'll take you to a river and show you how to do it.

BARRY: I've got some Old Spice after shave. It smells real good. Mary, keep it till he's old enough to shave.

MALCOLM: And here's a tube of Dencorub. When you grow up and go out into the wilderness all day, preachifying, your legs will ache something bad. This stuff will soothe the muscles.

JASPER (*to Josephine*): Hey Mary, I had a dream last night and I dreamt that Herod is out to get your boy and do him in. You'd best go off to Egypt. I know a people smuggler who'll take you there by boat.

GERRY: So they snuck out of Israel and got to Egypt. They had to swim the last bit because, as usual, the boat sank. When they got there they were put in a Detention Centre while their case for being refugees was being decided. After a couple of years they lost their case and were deported back to Israel. But luckily Herod had just died so they were OK. The End.

CREATION 101

SCENE: *The scene is the creation class in a school for young gods. They are learning how to create universes. The three young gods are Yahweh, Zeus and Aphrodite. Their teacher should not be considered as a superior god. In fact, as the story progresses, we will see that he, along with Zeus and Aphrodite, is a short-sighted god when compared to our own.*

This whimsical story is quite theologically unsound and it is based on the heresy that there is not just one god, but many. However the intention is not to promote polytheism but rather to display the creative choices that our one true God made when He created our world and everything in it.

TEACHER: Well, godlings, let's see how you got on with your last assignment. As you know, you had to design a universe, for which you would be its god. For homework you have to actually create your universe and bring it along to class next week. Now Zeus, what do you have for us?

ZEUS: Well, I chose a universe with seventeen dimensions. That would give me sufficient flexibility. It will be densely packed with lots of worlds, colliding with one another all the time. Wham! Bam!

TEACHER: Will there be any living creatures?

ZEUS: Oh, yes. They'll be carefully programmed so that I can control them remotely. I'll also control all the matter so that from their perspective my universe will be totally unpredictable.

TEACHER: What about sexes? How many?

ZEUS: Five. Yes, there will be five sexes, with a complicated system of procreation. But it will mean that there will always be plenty of new creatures to take the place of those that get knocked out with all the wonderful collisions.

TEACHER: But wouldn't they be wiped out along with their parents? If their whole world ...

ZEUS: That's the clever part. Whenever a new being is procreated it appears on a different world, far away from the one that their five parents live on.

TEACHER: So the offspring won't be raised by their parents?

ZEUS: Oh no, they'll be millions of miles away. In any case research shows that having children raised by parents is a very inefficient process. In my universe the creatures will have a thing called a 'brain' and this will be programmed by special cosmic rays that will beam

knowledge in from outer space. I've got a contract with a company called Wikiteach that will provide the content. Of course I will retain ultimate control. The creatures will have to obey me because they'll know nothing else.

TEACHER: Good work. Now Aphrodite, what have you designed?

APHRODITE: My world will only have two dimensions – a flat universe. I've gone for the beauty of simplicity. My beings will be shapes that slide around peacefully. None of your nasty blowings up!

TEACHER: What will it look like?

APHRODITE: Everything will be pink and pale blue.

TEACHER: So I suppose you'll have only one sex.

APHRODITE: That's right. All my creatures will be 'its'.

TEACHER: So you'll need only one parent to give birth to a baby creature.

APHRODITE: Oh, no. There'll be no births or babies in my universe. Horrible things, babies! My creatures will be created as adults, all at the same time. But there will also be no deaths either. I'll create my universe with just the right number of creatures and with no births or deaths the population will stay the same – always perfect.

TEACHER: So no sickness or disease? No wars?

APHRODITE: No, my universe will be perfect in every way. It will be peaceful because I shall program my creatures to keep out of each other's way. It will be a beautiful, quiet universe where nothing will ever go wrong.

TEACHER: So if there are no births you will have to create all your people at the same time. Won't that be a lot of work, for you?

APHRODITE: Not really. How I plan to do it is to create two people first. I'm going to call them Ken and Barbie. I'll create for them a large factory and their job will be to produce all the other Kens and Barbies. When we have enough I'll arrange for the factory to burn down – safely of course, so that nobody gets hurt.

TEACHER: But if you have Kens and Barbies, won't that mean you'll have two sexes?

APHRODITE: Not really – they'll all be 'its'. It's just that the Barbie people will have blonde hair and big hips and the Ken people will have black hair and big muscles. But all the

Barbies will be identical and all the Kens will be the same. And they'll all be 'its'. I've heard that having more than one sex leads to big trouble.

TEACHER: And Yahweh, what about you?

YAWEH: I've selected 3 dimensions and two sexes. I shall call my people men and women. But I have deliberately avoided writing a program to control them. I intend to give them free will.

TEACHER: But you can't do that – only we gods can have free will. How will you control them?

YAWEH: I won't. They'll be free to choose good or evil. I've also invented a new app called LOVE.

TEACHER: And what might that be?"

YAWEH: Love means one person choosing to act towards another in the way that they would like them to be treated themselves – doing good without expecting anything in return.

TEACHER: But we don't even have such a thing among us creator gods. I can't quite get my head around this concept. What's in it if one of the creatures 'loves' another. Will they get some sort of advantage – some sort of control?

YAWEH: No, the idea is that love is its own reward.

APHRODITE: Well at least you won't have to love *them*. That would be degrading.

YAWEH: Oh, but I will. I will not only give them being, I will love them to their uttermost depths.

ZEUS: That's a crazy idea. It'd be like building something out of LEGO and loving every brick. If you build something you have to be able to knock it down and smash the pieces. Being a god means being in control.

APHRODITE: This love stuff sounds messy," said Aphrodite. "If you love them then they might think that they're gods themselves. That would never do. The easiest way to have peace is not to *ask* them to treat others as they would like to be treated themselves, but to *make* them. It's not that difficult to write a control program – I could show you how to do it if you'd like.

YAWEH: No, I know how to write such a program. It's just that I think it would be more interesting to let them choose for themselves. I rather like the idea of my people loving me because they want to.

TEACHER: I'm not sure that would be practical. What about intervention? If you give them free will, and you say you're going to love them, you'll have to be constantly fixing things up when they make a mess. It's not a very user friendly universe – for you I mean.

YAWEH: On the whole I won't intervene. I intend to make some physical laws so that causes have predictable consequences.

APHRODITE: But won't that take the fun out of things? My world will be completely unpredictable. It will be like being in a fun park for my creatures – you know, like those funny mirrors in Luna Park.

ZEUS: I agree. The more unpredictable you make a universe the more fun you can have. I don't intend having any laws of nature. You can't have them being able to predict what will happen. That's something that only gods should be able to do. If you're not careful they'll develop a thing called 'science' and come to believe that they can explain everything. They'll even think that you don't exist! You can't have that. No, by having an unpredictable world my creatures will know that I control everything.

YAWEH: But I will intervene occasionally. I'll call these interventions 'miracles'. They will be used to teach my people.

TEACHER: Preposterous! Whatever you call love sounds too good for mere created creatures. What will you do if they don't love you back – what if they reject you?

YAWEH: I've thought of that. If necessary I'm prepared to be born as one of them. I've worked out a way of doing this.

ZEUS: They might still reject you. What if they decide to kill you? You have to show them who's boss.

YAWEH: There's a distinct possibility that I might have to die in such a world."

TEACHER: Wouldn't it be better to program them so that they always did the right thing? It would be a lot simpler! I go for simplicity!

YAWEH: No, I want them to love me, but I don't want to *force* them to love me. I know it's a bold experiment but I'm determined to proceed.

TEACHER: Ridiculous. And how will you communicate with them? I presume you'll write down all they need to know about what they have to do.

YAWEH: No, I've developed another App called PRAYER. I'll speak to them in their hearts, and if they listen, they will hear me and can communicate back.

TEACHER: What's a heart?

YAWEH: Well a heart itself is just what some of my people will call the pump that I've designed to pump the blood around their bodies to keep them alive. But when I say that I'll speak to them in their hearts I'm just using this word as a figure of speech. I mean that I'll speak to them in their innermost selves.

ZEUS: I know what you mean. I heard about something like that from my godmother. She said that she heard about a universe where the creatures ran on electricity and they had a thing called a 'battery' to pump the electricity around their wires. I see, so you'll plant a little speaker and microphone inside their batteries and use it to give them their orders. I must say that giving them free will is a novel idea, but I presume that you'll instantly annihilate any of them who choose to disobey you. Wham! Bam!

YAWEH: Oh no, that's such a nasty thing to do. I still think that *making* your people do what is good for them is the simplest way to handle things, but if you *insist* that they have free will the best thing to do is for any that choose to disobey you should be sent back for a factory reset – painlessly of course.

TEACHER: Well we'll see how all your universes shape up next week when you create them and bring them along to class. But for the planning part of this assignment I'm awarding you, Zeus, an A+. Your universe sounds pretty dynamic. Aphrodite, you get a B-. Your universe will work, but it seems pretty unexciting. As for you my boy, Yahweh, I'm giving you an F. I believe your concept to be totally unworkable, and even if you manage to build it, it would go against the dignity of us creator gods. As for your being prepared to get inside your universe, and 'love' your creatures, it's the most crackpot idea I've heard in all my years of teaching!

The bell rings.

TEACHER: Now you all have to go off to sport. And, Zeus my boy ...

ZEUS: Yes sir?

TEACHER: If you must play billiards with the planets please put them back in their proper orbits afterwards. I had a heavens of a job to get Venus and Uranus sorted after your game last week. Oh, and Aphrodite.

APHRODITE: Yes, teacher?

TEACHER: I know you like archery, but be careful where you arch, and keep clear of your arch enemies. And Yahweh.

YAWEH: Yes, sir?

TEACHER: This crazy idea of a game you have. What's it called again?

YAWEH: Cricket, sir.

TEACHER: Ah yes, that's right. You really must think it out again. Your rules really have me stumped. I mean, a game that can last for all eternity, and still end in a draw, is never really going to catch on. Try to find a quicker version – a game that might last, say, a week at most; that will be a test for you I know. But at the moment I find that snail racing on Mars infinitely more interesting than your cricket.

(I am grateful to Nicholas Fried who added some of his own inimitable humour to this story when we first presented it as a drama in church.)