

HeadStuff & HeartStuff

A randomly eclectic
collage of writings by
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To all those who have influenced (or been the subject of) my attempts at refining thought and translating thought into word – thank you.

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PoetryStuff

I could no more define poetry
than a terrier can define a rat.
(A E Houseman)

Worlds apart

Our worlds meet here,
here at the lock gate,
here, where our Victorian forebears
bequeath us control of the canal's tides.

I have travelled a hundred manic motorway miles
to this oasis of speed-limited leisure –
and here *you* are, halting our onward march,
flaunting your bearded alternative lifestyle,
ponderously and with vexatious lack of haste
dismantling your source of wind-blown eco-power.

Who are you? Society dropout, perhaps?
Superannuated representative of sixties flower-people?
Or fugitive from the world of performance targets,
of deadlines and corporate stabbings –
and the inescapable enticement to conspicuous consumption?

No matter, for at long last we move on –
yet still the absurd irrationality of my irritation rankles.

Later, idling our leisured return
we encounter you once again.
Moored now by the canal's shady edge
you wave in friendly recognition –
though gesturing us to an even steadier pace.

Who are you? Will we ever know,
for tomorrow we relinquish our control of these tides,
replicating our motorway madness
to return to a world
somehow more distant than before.

We take the hectic pace of 'normal' life for granted and forget how long it takes
to wind down. A few days plying the Oxford Canal on a narrowboat is a good
start!

Friendship

Other times,
other places,
youthful webs are woven,
paths cross
– but rarely.

Pates are shiner now,
hair greying,
figures fuller,
dreams achieved
– or abandoned.

Life's remaining span
is to be lived gracefully
– and disgracefully.

But still,
Friends are better Reunited
in the flesh
than cyberspace.

Schooldays (a haiku)

Beethoven despairs:
four hands massacre music
at two pianos.

A visit to an old school friend at his home in France – 30 years after our previous meeting – awoke memories of scavenging through the music room cupboards to find music for two pianos, and of the subsequent painfully approximate rendering of concerto and symphony.

The Paintbrush

You taunt me;
you, superior in your upright sleekness,
seductively soft,
yet silently sadistic.

You, and your big brother,
gross and overweight,
like some force-fed progenitor of foie gras –
but without the subtlety of outcome.

You, and your anorexic sister,
ever in search of some illusory perceived perfection
to her last bristle-breath.

Erect in your jar you taunt me,
incontrovertible symbol of my own impotence.

You taunted me then, too, with your termly reports:
‘Could do better’,
‘Must try harder’.

Not for you the accolade in a refined italic hand:
‘French, A+, top of class’.
Nor that distinctive rounded script:
‘Mathematics, A, excellent work’.
No, for you, this only will suffice;
only this: ‘Art, C–, could do better, must try harder’.

These forty-five years I have banished you to your jar,
buried you in the hidden recesses of my memory,
yet even now you enslave me in your pitiless thrall.

In the hand of Picasso you dart your monochrome course
to capture with deft flourish a minimalist bull.
For Monet, you nimbly, delicately dance the canvas,
impressing a fandango of spectral indulgence.
Partnered with the subdued precision of Dürer
you convey through the crackled glaze of five centuries
an agonised Christ.

But now,
now it is finished;
you are finished;
for I have discovered my hands,
and their multi-hued stigmata affirm
that
I
am
FREE!

I knew the art workshop would take me outside my comfort zone, but the frustration – anger even – of not being able to portray what was in my head I was not prepared for. And then, just as we were about to finish... the Jackson Pollock moment that redeemed the day – hands in paint, splatters on canvas and a complete release of all that pent-up tension!

This face

I see your face:
this face haunts my waking hours,
fuels my nocturnal wakefulness.

I see your face:
drunken driver,
scalpel wielder,
accuser, abuser,
night intruder.

Oh God, why?...

Why me?

Voices,
I hear voices, too –
helpful, yet so unhelpful:

'Move on',
'Snap out of it',
'Forgive and forget'.

One voice, though, is silent –
this is the voice I need to hear,
the voice which says,
'This is *my* story,
this is how *I* feel,
I am *sorry*'.

In the stillness,
still one more voice,
quiet, but insistent:
'You are my children,
I love you
and I call you by name'.

My head believes it –
but my heart?...

The journey is long and hard,
the progress stumbling,
but there is grace enough
to transform even this face – your face
into the face of Christ.

Written specifically for a friend whose shoulder operation went disastrously wrong, leaving her in permanent pain and having repeatedly to relive the experience through a five-year legal case – but in general for all who live with the memory of some traumatic event.

Power cut

Technology rules,
bringing faceless dialogue
to stress-laden lives.

Power loss compels
digital disconnection;
spring sunshine, time, space.

Respite is fleeting:
chainsaw carnage soon restores
life's frenzied madness.

Ynys Enlli (Bardsey Island)

In times past,
the Church grew fat
on its monastic indulgences:
instant promotion for pilgrim saints
who made this place
their life journey's end.

What now speaks
to those who escape here,
where diurnal rhythms are rediscovered,
where water is to be treasured
and candles flicker in the evening breeze?

What now speaks
in this enveloping stillness
of birdcall and bleating,
of mournful seal sighs
and time-blown voices in an ancient Celtic tongue?

Written on holiday on Bardsey Island off the west coast of Wales; a early monastic site and place of pilgrimage through the ages. With only a dozen or so permanent residents, it has no electricity (unless you happen to have a generator!), a limited supply of spring water and boasts the luxury of compost toilets. No shops, no discos, no tourist attractions (except the birds, the seals and the sheep). And the local boatman (whose father was boatman before him) ferries you from the mainland if the weather permits (which it often does not – and did delay us by a day!)

Time out

Under the tree of idleness
time and space awaken
a sensory dawn –

sky – blue, laced with wool;

air – clear, pure,
lavender-scented,
pine-fragrant;

and sounds, distinct across the valley:
church bell,
school bell,
birdsong,
an unseen bark.

Time passes.

Under this tree,
an idle dawn
bursts
into the eternity that is
Now.

Summer mountain break,
spiritual recharging –
processor idle.

They toil to what end –
bees buzzing in lavender?
Do we know? Do they?

Written during a lazy late summer break at La Bastide, a small village in the foothills of the Alps, in the Var department of the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region of southern France.

Us
(a dialogue/poem
for two voices)

I –
I am
I think, therefore I am
I shop, therefore I am.
I stand apart,
separate,
for me –
me.

I –
I am
I think, therefore I am
I shop, therefore I am.
I stand apart,
separate,
for me –
me.

We –
we were created
together

in love

by love

through love

for love

and yet

we stand apart

separate

divided

by race

by colour

envy

greed

education

experience

poverty

riches

youth

age

prejudice

hatred

gender

sexuality

culture

creed

Not yours, but mine

My will be done

My choice

This is **our** choice

Mine

Is this then freedom:
that we celebrate our comfortable separate sameness?

Is this then life:
that we build barriers to keep **you** from **us**?

Is this then love:
that we deny the tartan diversity of creation?

that we reject the disturbing call to togetherness...
which draws me to you...

in pursuit of the improbable community...

and you to me...

is...

that...

us?

Written for an experimental worship service.

For best effect, the two participants should stand well apart, yet visible to each other, so that the words said together (the centred text) can be synchronised.

If the geography permits the two participants to move together physically at the end, so much the better.

Psalm 62

Wait.
Be still...

Four minutes and thirty-three seconds is a long time.

*Noise bursts in,
the busyness of doing, not being.*

Wait.
Be still...

... trust in God.

You are my rock.

Wait.
Be still...

... hope in God.

You are my salvation.

Wait.
Be still...

... rest in God.

Without you I am nothing.

Wait.
Be still...

Love...

God...

... and there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

Written at the event that inspired *The Paintbrush*, this makes reference to the work by John Cage entitled *Four minutes and thirty-three seconds*, where the pianist walks on stage, lifts the piano lid, remains for precisely that time, then finishes. It's all about being aware of the ambient noise which is always present, even (or especially) in the search for the silence which is at the heart of God. And if we were truly able to find that silence, it would be the ultimate worship experience of Revelation 8.1, 'When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour'.

Critical Mass

We will remember Jesus
in this bread,
in this wine.

A sentimental restaging
of some haloed moment of history, perhaps?
An empty ritualistic replay
clothed in Sunday mummery?

No, we will remember Jesus
in this bread,
in this wine:
ordinary things of life
that Christ makes special
for here,
for now.

This is a drama outside time,
beyond time;
and yet we must present it,
must *re-present* it
not for yesterday's people
but for those of today.

This drama is about us,
for we are the body of Christ,
ordinary people,
with ordinary lives.

We are to be taken,
to be made special,
to be broken
and to be given to others –
extraordinarily.

In this we will remember Jesus
and in remembering, be re-membered.

At the time this was written, a series of youth events entitled *Critical Mass* took place in the Chichester Diocese. This poem was particularly written for an experimental Eucharist at the Church of the Ascension in Haywards Heath.

It leans unashamedly on liturgies of *Common Worship* and the Iona Community and makes reference to the writings of Michael Mayne.

Reflections on an icon

At this time,
for me,
the table looks
round.

There is no one place
higher
or
lower;
no seat reserved for
greatest
or
least.

At this table...
there is space
for one
and
for all;
and an invitation
to join
a dance –
the dance –
if I but listen
for
the
music.

The icon *Trinity* by the 15th century Russian painter Andrei Rublev is well-known and much has been written about it. To be sure, it is full of symbolism, but it can also speak directly, personally and without specific interpretation. For now, this is how I respond; tomorrow may be different. And what you see may be something completely other. The poem hints also at words of Friedrich Nietzsche: 'Those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music'.

The Tower of Babel

God said to Godself,
(so as not to be specifically male, you understand),

‘These mortals are thinking themselves gods.
‘I’ll put in their minds to create Church –
‘that should give them a suitable distraction.’

And it did...

They created
synods and structures,
curiae and committees.

They warred over
dogmas and doctrines,
heresies and hermeneutics.

They obsessed over
rituals and rules,
gender and gays.

But...

They forgot
the hungry and thirsty,
the poor and imprisoned.

Then God said,
(to those who would listen),

‘I AM.’

‘I am as I AM in Jesus,
‘I am as I AM in each one of you,
‘I AM the one who loves you all.’

‘It’s as simple as that.’

It all started with a conversation about ‘religious’ words and their divisive qualities: Catholic, Liberal, Evangelical; Eucharist, Communion, Lord’s Supper; being ‘born again’, being ‘saved’; giving your testimony, telling your story...

Why can’t we celebrate what we share and our diversity rather than squabble over our differences?

The Hermit

'Come', they said,
'Come, and live here,
here in our church.'

'Here you can be alone;
just you,
you with God.'

It was hard:
here was no sanctuary,
no peace;
no aloneness –
only emptiness.

And then...
they came.

By ones and twos
they came.

I sat with them
and listened:
to their silence,
to the outpouring of a heart's pain,
to the sharing of a heart's desire,
to the dawning of a new possibility.

In that listening
I saw
the stirring of songs,
the shedding of burdens,
the sprouting of seeds long buried,
the joy of new births –

and
I saw
God.

What if...?

It's OK,
comfortable,
safe,
to say,
'God WANTS you'.

What if God says,
'Whom shall I send?'

What if God says,
'I want **YOU**'?

What if I say,
'Yes!'

Could I? –
Can I? –
Would I? –
Will I? –
and not count the cost?

A reflection on Isaiah chapter 6.

In frivolous moments, I'm inclined to refer to this passage as biblical confirmation that God travels by rail: 'I saw the Lord high and lifted up and his train filled the temple'.

Ascension

You came, you lived, you died.
Returning, you break bread –
and all is well.

I lift up my eyes...
clouds,
you,
then nothing.

Whence cometh my help?

Belief, disbelief, unbelief,
understanding, misunderstanding,
faith, doubt...

Strength and weakness,
strength *in* weakness...

Mystery, incomprehension.

I lift up my eyes...
Whence cometh my help?

Stand up, sit down,
dress up, dress down,
kneel, bow, raise hands,
recite the old incantations,
light a candle, or two, or more...

Hi-tech, lo-tech,
multi-sensory, anti-sensory,
ecstatic, austere,
convergent, divergent,
with it, without it...

Unlocking your box for an hour on Sunday – if we dare.

I lift up my eyes...
Whence cometh my help?

Dream majestic dreams,
seek revelatory visions...

Turn moons to blood,
presage apocalypse now...

Willing the one, final, perfect, dénouement –
but in our time, not yours.

I lift up my eyes...
Whence cometh my help?

‘Do you still understand so little?
I am with you now, today, tomorrow, to the end of time.’

Yes, Lord,
and still we do not feed you,
still we do not clothe you,
still we do not welcome you.

Each day we crucify you...
no, *I* crucify you, today, each day, every day...

Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of the living God,
have mercy on me, a sinner.

One of Milton Jones' *10 Second Sermons* asserts, 'One of the mysteries of Christianity is why Christians rarely admit that so much of it is a mystery'. For me, the Ascension is very near the top of the mystery list.

I recall that I was just choosing the music for the Ascension Day service when I had a visitation from the Jehovah's Witnesses. After they left, I printed a copy of this poem, chased after them and thrust it upon them. I have no idea what they made of it!

Rev.

That kiss, Lord –
it was a mistake.

Yes, I enjoyed it –
but it was a mistake.

And now,
now I've hurt people –
people I love.

Being denounced,
denied,
reviled,
rejected –
it's a heavy cross to bear.

And the Church –
even the Church
washes its hands of me;
hiding behind its canons,
its processes and procedures.

What will *you* do, Lord?

Will you take me back,
invite me once again
to join the dance?

A reflection on the BBC programme *Rev.*, a portrayal of the somewhat chaotic life of an inner-city priest with a satirical take on the foibles of the Church.

In the penultimate episode many Good Friday themes are cleverly threaded through the narrative together with hints of forgiveness and resurrection.

Let sleeping dogs lie?

Dog.
Asleep.

Spread-eagled,
chilled,
relaxed,
paws a-praying.

Is this
what you ask *us* to be?

People of prayer,
open, vulnerable,
exposing our private parts
to public scrutiny?

You cannot be serious!

Hey, you –
our Father who art in heaven:
I thought we were a team,
grumpy old men in partnership.
Now look what you got me into!

I didn't want to be involved –
you knew that –
and you seem to find the outcome
amusing.

OK, so I can see the funny side, too,
and I admit (without being too effusive)
that 'the experience did not live up
to my worst expectations'.

But...
couldn't we be grumpy old men together
just once in a while?

... please?

Letting go

You know
how I hate it
when people
don't do things
my way.

Standing back
is hard
but you show me
that your way
is best...

... for everyone.

As I recall, these arose from a *Songs of Praise* occasion in which I had no great desire to be involved. As it turned out, I got 'sucked in' to doing more than pretty much anyone else!

Foolishness

I AM
all-powerful

I CHOOSE
powerlessness

at the hands
in the hands
through the hands
of my creation.



Paradox

God the creator,
all-powerful, all-knowing –
yet also my friend.

ProseStuff

Always be a poet,
even in prose.
(Charles Baudelaire)

How far is Bethlehem (a Nativity story for today)

Doesn't bureaucracy just get to you? All those faceless, pen-pushing civil servants who seem to have nothing better to do than make work for the working man. And politicians – they're always banging on about making life easier for small businesses, whilst wrapping us in yet more red tape. I'm a carpenter, after all, not a professional form-filler. There really was no need to make Mary and me travel down to Bethlehem to identify ourselves. Yes, I know we're always hearing about 'money laundering' and 'the war on terror', but couldn't it all have been sorted out locally, or by post, or even over the internet? And Mary eight-and-a-half months pregnant, too.

Well, anyway, we set out on the road to Bethlehem. I was naturally a bit concerned about Mary – and our car, too – it's not that reliable. You can't afford anything more than an old banger on what I earn. We were well on the way, when Mary turned to me and said, 'It's started.' 'What do you mean?', I replied. 'Contractions – the baby's on its way'. Well you can imagine – not the ideal time or place!

I pulled over and we discussed whether to go on or not – how frequent are the contractions – we're closer to Bethlehem – we should get there quicker – there's a good hospital – we're going to get a hefty fine if we don't get our papers in by tomorrow. Well, to cut a long story short, we agreed to travel on. I could see that poor Mary was in some pain now – the contractions were stronger and coming more regularly. Eventually we arrived at the West Bank wall and the crossing point – not long now – but, oh dear, the queue!

I hadn't expected this. Of course I'd read about people getting held up for hours, being searched and all their possessions examined in the minutest detail, but there was no reason for that to happen to us. Reluctantly leaving Mary, I got out and walked up towards the head of the queue. The wall in all its oppressive ugliness blocked out the late afternoon sunshine. 'Peace be with you', proclaimed the enormous banner from the Israel Ministry of Tourism. Some peace!

I approached a group of the soldiers guarding the crossing. 'My wife's in labour – can you hurry us through?' What an uncouth, unpleasant and unhelpful bunch! 'There'll be no more let through tonight – we've got our orders.' I kept pleading with them, but when they started waving their weapons threateningly in my direction, I decided I'd better back off – I'd be no use to Mary in a police cell for the night – or worse.

On my way back to the car, my mind was racing, trying to focus on all those things we'd learnt at our antenatal classes – you know, the breathing and all that stuff. 'My waters have broken, Joe', she said when I reached her. I was panicking. She seemed calm. 'Go and see if you can find someone to help.' I walked back along the line of waiting cars. Most refused even to wind down the window – I suppose you can't blame them – you hear such awful tales nowadays. At last this young woman offered to help. I had some difficulty understanding her – she was obviously a foreigner and didn't speak Hebrew too well – but she seemed to know what to do – just a quiet confidence that inspired trust.

We moved the car to a more secluded spot, she fetched some towels and blankets from her car and we made Mary as comfortable as possible. The contractions were stronger and closer together now. 'Almost there', said the young woman, 'next time – push'.

What seemed like an age later, there he was, our beautiful boy, blood-streaked but bawling lustily. Mary wrapped him in a towel, he quietened, and she put him to her breast. He opened his eyes wide and looked at me, unblinking – it seemed as if the wisdom of the whole world lay behind those shining eyes.

Our helper had fetched two of the soldiers. Their blustering arrogance had evaporated. 'May I hold him?', said one, leaning his weapon against the car as he took the child – our child – in his arms. He looked down at the tiny bundle before him and said, simply, gently, 'I'm sorry'. The child gazed up at him as if to say, 'This is just the way it had to be – and has to be'.

The other soldier had wandered across to the foot of the wall. He returned with a single deep purple bloom and held it before the baby. Mary took it, breathed in its fragrance and smiled. 'Thank you', she said.

I looked over to the wall where the soldier had found the flower. Piled against the base of the concrete watchtower were floral tributes – they must have been for the young lad who was shot here a few days ago.

I said nothing to Mary, for it seemed like an omen.

'O sad and troubled Bethlehem...'

The previous Christmas, I had partnered these alternative words to the melody of the traditional carol 'O little town of Bethlehem' with images of the Israeli West Bank Barrier – a wall which creates a physical barrier between the Israeli and Palestinian populations. It is planned to extend more than 700km with a height of up to 8m.

Could this alternative rendering of the Nativity story reflect how the birth of Jesus might be played out today?

Postscript: Canon Andrew White, Vicar of St George's Church, Baghdad, wrote in an article in April 2007: 'Last month, a member of my own staff was unable to get his pregnant wife to hospital because there were so many checkpoints. She gave birth in the car.'

The road to Emmaus

We made a gloomy pair walking along together, hands in pockets, heads down, engrossed in our own thoughts.

Eventually, my companion spoke, 'A penny for them'.

'Well, hope's dead. We expected so much, and now it's all gone pear-shaped.'

Silence returned.

A good mile later, he spoke again.

'Think of the journey we've been on these past three years. The excitement, the crowds, the healings, the discussions, the wise words – so many ways of looking at people and situations differently from that we've always taken for granted. All topsy-turvy. And wouldn't you like to wrong-foot your critics like that?'

I felt my spirits begin to lift. As we walked on we shared experiences, stories, insights. The conversation become animated.

We at last arrived at the pub where we planned to eat, ordered and sat in companionable silence sipping our beers. When the food arrived, he paused briefly before eating. I saw his lips moving noiselessly as he took the flatbread and divided it between us.

At that very moment, something clicked in my befuddled brain – a ray of sunshine breaking through the gathered clouds. There was that real sense of hope reborn; and the anticipation of a future transformed by the past.

Which it has been.

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus recorded in Luke 24 is another of those mysterious events surrounding the risen Christ, leaving (as usual!) a plethora of unanswered questions for us to ponder.

Zak

'Wankers', that's what they call us. 'Banker wankers.'

But you know, I work jolly hard: I'm in the office before 7am, and often don't leave until seven or eight in the evening. And if there's a deal to be closed it can be long nights and weekends.

I'm proud of what I do – Corporate Finance – it keeps the economy going. It's nothing like the casino banking that people keep ranting on about. Yes, I know my bonus last year was well into six figures but I really do deserve it.

At least, that's what I used to think.

A few months ago, I'd picked up my new car and was home early for once. As I waited outside my house for the protective remote-controlled gates to open, I noticed a neighbour down the street. Not that he was a newcomer or anything, but I don't have much to do with my neighbours – and, to be honest, I've no time for idle chit-chat.

But here he was – Jez as I now know him – out playing with the kids. There was a whole horde of them – all ages – and adults – not to mention a young lad on crutches and a girl in a wheelchair, and they were all totally engrossed in the enjoyment of their game. An elderly couple had even brought out a pair of garden chairs and were sitting, quite clearly finding great pleasure in watching.

I drove in and the gates closed behind me. Normally I just go inside the house, fix myself a drink, make a few phone calls, watch the telly – you know, all the usual things. But I just felt I had to go back to the street and watch. There was something gripping about the way all these people were getting on together – and it seemed to be Jez who was animating it.

After a while, he came over to me.

'Zak, isn't it? You know, I really wanted to meet you. How would it be if I popped over a bit later? – we could maybe have a chat over a couple of beers – and I'd love to see your home.'

Well, as you can imagine, that was totally unexpected. And I don't know quite why, but I agreed – even enthusiastically.

I've never met anyone quite like Jez. It's as if he can see into your soul. I talked with him – a complete stranger – about things I've never shared with anyone before. He told me about the boxing club he runs at the other end of the town – the old council estate where there's a lot of unemployment and problems with alcohol and drugs. That's a place I wouldn't dream of going to. How could he talk of such an area and its inhabitants with such warmth and affection?

'Why don't you come and see what goes on?' he asked. Well outside my comfort zone, I thought.

Still, I went.

Now I go every week. It's a priority – the day I have to leave work on time, come what may, even if I get disapproving looks from my colleagues. I bought the lads some new kit the other week – you should have seen the expression on their faces! And we've had a pizza evening at my place – they really went for the table football and billiards – and the gym equipment.

Most surprising of all – I was buzzing!

I've been learning a lot from the lads about what it means when parents are made redundant and have to survive on benefits. I've come to see the human cost of many corporate reorganisations. At work, we glibly talk of 'slimming the cost base', 'efficiency savings', 'tailoring the workforce' – but never of redundancies.

I'm not sure I can do this job any longer.

A contemporary take on the story of Jesus meeting Zacchaeus in Luke 19. The piece emerged from a group discussion following the reading of the biblical text and a clip from the film *Dead Man Walking*.

Whereas Zacchaeus seems to have an instant change of heart, more often than not change is a continuing work-in-progress – as reflected in this piece.

SongStuff

Hell is full of musical
amateurs.

(George Bernard Shaw)

Wait in Stillness

*Wait in stillness for God, my soul;
in him alone you will find your rest.
He is my rock, he is my strength, my hope and my defence:
I will trust in him, I will stand firm.*

How shall I know who is my friend,
when all around attack me.
They sweetly smile, yet cheat and lie:
I can trust in God, trust in God

Wait in stillness...

What can I gain from worldly wealth?
What profit fame and status?
All count for naught in heaven's sight:
I must trust in God, trust in God.

Wait in stillness...

Two things I know of the Lord my God –
his pow'r alone is mighty;
his faithful love throughout all time:
I will trust in God, trust in God.

Wait in stillness...

I will trust in him, I will stand firm.

In Psalm 62 (from which the words are drawn), the psalmist expresses not only confidence in God, but also doubts and concerns. The words and musical setting were originally written for the 1998 RSCM Sussex Area Diocesan Choirs Festival.

The refrain is intended to be sung with a very relaxed and prayerful feel; the verses with a greater sense of forward movement. I find it helpful to think of the verses being diversionary thoughts which inevitably break into my attempts at prayer. Each interruption is dismissed successively more firmly: *I can* trust in God... *I must* trust in God... *I will* trust in God.

This is the Body

Onesimus: I ran away and now I am sorry,
I must return: accept what may come.
Yes, I am scared, but Jesus is with me,
walking beside me and bringing me home.

Paul: My dearest friend, I pray for you daily,
give thanks for faith which makes known God's Word.
Now I am sending one who has wronged you;
treat him with kindness, as one in the Lord.

Philemon: How should I treat this scoundrel returning:
runaway slave or brother in Christ?
Will I seem weak if I make him welcome,
save him a flogging and spare him his life?

All: Christ is the one who brings us together
master and slave are treated as one.
Getting it wrong, yet loved and forgiven:
this is the body of God's only Son.

Paul's Letter to Philemon with its 25 verses is among the shortest books of the Bible. Onesimus, the runaway slave, has been with Paul, who is now asking Philemon, Onesimus' former master, to accept him back, not just as a slave, but as one who is equal before God.

What we tend to forget is the deeply subversive and countercultural nature of this request, for the conventional penalty for a returned runaway slave is death.

Let the journey be my home

God the unchanging, Lord beyond time,
you call us to change, though we'd rather stay the same.
As we try to follow the path set before,
let Christ the Way lead our journey –
let the journey be our home.

God of creation, Lord of the dawn,
you show us the day, yet we'd rather keep our night.
Now we see but dimly what you will reveal:
let Christ the Truth light our journey –
let the journey be our home.

God the all-knowing, look to my heart:
let my thoughts be yours, let your Spirit play its part.
Let my hands be Christ's hands to serve here on earth,
let Christ the Life be my journey –
let the journey be my home.

Written for a priest friend who was moving with his family to Australia. the title of this song derives from that of the autobiography, *The Journey is My Home*, of Lavinia Byrne, author, broadcaster and lecturer. In 1964 she entered the Roman Catholic community of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, studied French, and went on to teach in a convent. Subsequently, she turned to writing, and produced a number of books, including, in 1994, *Woman at the Altar*, a book which argued the case for the ordination of women as priests in the Roman Catholic Church. Over the following six years, her work was condemned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican, and she suffered various more or less subtle pressures to recant or revise her views. The Abbey which published the book in the US was ordered to withdraw the book and destroy any remaining stock, and eventually, in January 2000, she felt she had to leave her community, effectively to start a new life at the age of 52.

Her story is a reminder that no matter how settled we may consider our lives, circumstances will always change – whether gently or dramatically – and that we have to live with the way things *are*, not the way they were or might have been (*if only...*) or ought (in our opinion) to be.

There is another aspect of the journey reflected in the words of the song: we travel together as the body of Christ – at different places on the road, to be sure, but together. The commitment to the Christian journey, though, is a personal one – this is why the words of the song change from 'our' to 'my' in the final verse.

The Pentecost Rap

N Jesus' disciples were all feeling quite depressed:

1 'We don't know what to do now, 'cos he's been and gone and left.

2 He said he'd send a helper, but as yet there's been no sign',

3 'If this job were a proper job, I think I'd just resign!'

A The Spirit of God, the Spirit of God,
What they had been promised was the Spirit of God

1 'We were sitting all together', **2** 'we were wondering what to do,
when all at once we heard a sound like wind – it blew and blew'.

3 'Then tongues like fire came rushing down and rested on each head
and ev'ry one felt God's great power – it was as Jesus said'.

A The Spirit of God, the Spirit of God,
What they had received was the Spirit of God.

1 We went out in the town and spoke to folk from ev'ry land,
no matter what their language was they all could understand'.

N Some said: **2** 'This is amazing, but whatever can it mean',

N While others simply laughed and jeered: **3** 'It's to the pub they've been!'

A The Spirit of God, the Spirit of God,
What was flowing through them was the Spirit of God.

N Then Peter, bold as brass, stood up and to the crowd proclaimed:

P 'We're filled with God own Spirit – and of that we're not ashamed.
God pours it out on ev'ryone – on Mums and Dads alike,
On boys and girls, on black and white, on those you don't much like'.

A The Spirit of God, the Spirit of God,
God promises to pour it out – the Spirit of God.

N God's Spirit filled that fisherman, enabling him to say
How Jesus by his life and death and rising showed the way.

A 'We've done such wrong,' **N** the people cried, **A** 'tell us what we must do'.

P 'Turn back to God, be born anew, God's Spirit is for you'.

A The Spirit of God, the Spirit of God,
Thank you that we too can have the Spirit of God.

Key: **A** All, **N** Narrator, **1** **2** **3** Voices 1, 2, 3, **P** Peter

Waiting

*I'm sitting in my world, waiting, waiting as the party noise fades;
searching for the patch of blue in the grey:
there must be a better way.*

My life's not great but at least I know the pattern of every day.
It's best not to think what life might hold:
do I need any other way?

Then along you came and saw me, offered me the patch of blue.
You showed me what I could become:
yet I still held back from welcoming you.

I'm sitting in my world, waiting...

I'm afraid you want to change me; I don't want to be
some modeller's clay.

I don't want to be what I don't want to be:
I'd sooner wait for another day.

Yet still you did not leave me, you were there with each new day.
Through my waking hours and in times of rest
you kept me in the narrow way.

I'm sitting in my world, waiting...

As your hands transform me gently you leave the mark
of your nails on me.

I see a new shape to myself and the world:
yet my shape, my shape is still me.

I'm sitting in your world, waiting, waiting for what you say.

Now I've seen that patch of blue in the grey,

I know there's a better way... there's a better way...

there's a better way.

The man described in John 5 has been sitting waiting for a miracle for 38 years.
Does he really want to be healed?

Perhaps there is something of this biblical scenario reflected in the contemporary party crowd: we party, we go on a drinking binge, we do another line of coke, we get laid – and why? – because it avoids the necessity to face the emptiness inside ourselves. Yet we don't want to change, because that's an even scarier prospect.

So what happens? Our party going binge drinker experiences something of the living Jesus, who says 'Here's a way out of this mess. You may not know too much about me yet, but you can be sure I'm not just here to put on a piece of sticking plaster, I'm in it for the long haul. You have to do your bit as well, though, otherwise it won't work. I want to help you change, but you needn't worry about losing your identity – that's just not how I work. But remember: healing is often a long process, not a one-off event, so you have to be patient.'

Come to my party

Come to my party, ev'ry thing's set,
I've asked a bunch of friends and others I've met.
There's loads to eat and drink and cool things to do:
I'd really be pleased if you would come too.

Thank you for asking, I shan't be there,
I've lots of jobs to do, like washing my hair.
Please ask another time, but now I must fly:
I'm just going out with this real fit guy.

That's really kind, but I cannot come:
tonight I'm watching Chelsea playing at home.
Then when the match is done, I'm out with the lads,
and if I don't go they'll just think me sad.

There's a church meeting scheduled for eight,
I'm chairing the committee; mustn't be late.
We're sorting out the be roof and dealing with drains:
I'd love to accept but they need my brains.

I've got a great new game for my Wii,
I'm trying really hard to reach level three.
I need to surf the web and text all my friends,
I'll meet you on Facebook, but I shan't attend.

(Sadly and in a minor key)

No one has come though all heard my voice,
they all have found a reason; made their own choice.
I feel I should be angry, mostly I'm sad:

(original feel and tempo)

now go to the streets and bring good and bad.

Hoodies and VAT men, hookers and bums,
seekers for asylum, scared teenage mums,
young and old together dance to the beat:
for parties like this are where God we meet.

Written as a bouncy, fun reworking of Matthew 22.1-10, using suitably contemporary excuses for not coming to the party. An alternative rendering of the last verse seemed more appropriate for a junior school assembly!

*Come all you people, whoever you are,
ev'ryone's invited, no one is barred...*

The Disciple Song

We are disciples of Jesus,
we all are disciples of Jesus;
young and old, big and small,
there's a place for us all:
we are disciples of Jesus! YES, WE ARE!!

We want to learn more of Jesus,
we all want to learn more of Jesus;
young and old, big and small,
there's a place for us all:
we want to learn more of Jesus! YES, WE DO!!

You never know what's going to catch on! This little ditty, sketched out on the back of an envelope, has been used virtually every week at the Ascension in Haywards Heath to accompany the exit of the children and young people from the main service to their own groups. And the adults sing it with perhaps more gusto than the kids!