

God

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God For Mature Audiences Only – 3rd Edition

Great chunks of serious soul food
– strictly for adults only.

Tom Kerr

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God – for Mature Audiences Only

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Come on. Pick up. Pick up. I Know You're There

I called but you didn't pick up. I came around and knocked on the door, but, you were in a back room. Well, did you get my message then? I left you a message. It was written clear across the sky. It said, "I love you. I am always with you." I painted it with the colours of the sunset. Did you see it? It was beautiful, a real work of art, for all who were looking.

You didn't get that message? Okay, well how about the one from the stranger today who smiled at you? It was such a beautiful smile. One of my best, actually. The unexpected warmth of a stranger. That was me saying, "See, I am with you always, and I love you." And when they took the time to chat with you and be friendly; that was me reminding you that, there **is** still love in the world. My love for you, expressed through people who live out my love.

And that day when everything went right and life was good. The oil of my love was lubricating the wheels of the world that day to smooth your way.

And that other day when everything went wrong and life was awful. A friend called. You had a big whinge. The two of you mocked the pains of life and ended up having a good old, cynical laugh, about life with all its pressures.

That friend and that laughter were my medicinal gifts to you. I know you got them. And I know they healed you. You felt better afterwards, in spite of everything else.

I hope you read the gift card that came with it. The card read, "Even in the tough times, I love you. I am always with you."

I bumped into you down the street and took you to lunch the other day. Did you recognise me? We had a great time talking about the old days and the good times. And it was helpful too, to talk about our dreams and hopes for the future. We both developed a new sense of hope that afternoon. Of course your friend, who was a

true friend, lent me their skin that day so I could be with you. I thought you might recognise me in there as well.

Do you remember that person who went the extra mile to really do their best for you today? They lent me their life for that time. So I could reach you for a while and bless you. Did you see me behind their eyes? Or hear me behind their words? Or sense me in their touch?

And did I surprise you when I came to you all broken down and hurting, needing your help today? When I came to you as that lonely person, desperate for your attention, did you remember that, whenever you help someone, it's as if you have helped me? I take your gifts of caring for others personally. Every time you show love for someone, it's as if I'm on the receiving end as well. I come to you in need, so that you can have the chance to show your love for me. It's one more way in which I am always with you – one of the many ways.

That touching song on the radio, played just at the right time. The creative idea that sprang into your head; the reminder about your friend's birthday; the warning to slow down as you were driving; the feeling of comfort after you remembered the loss of your loved one; the silver edge of light hallowing the storm cloud. In a million ways, just today, I said, "Hi. I love you and I am always with you."

I understand you don't always get it. I know we speak a different language most of the time. But at those moments – those very special moments – when your spirit picks up the language of my Spirit, it's fantastic! It's such a thrill to connect with you, and to know, that you know, that I love you and will always be with you.

I'll keep calling. In fact I'll be calling again tomorrow, and dropping in, and bumping in to you down the street, and needing a favour from you, and doing you a three dimensional world wide sculpture, and singing to you, and...and telling you all over again, in countless ways, that I love you and that I am always with you.

When I call, pick up. It will do you good. It will do us both good. Stay tuned.

For Reflection

Bible Readings. (T.K. versions). James 1 v17 "Every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven; it comes down from God, the creator of all the heavenly lights, whose love will always shine upon us."

Matthew 28 v20b "And I will always be with you, always and forever."

Matthew 25 v31-46 "When you have helped even the least of my children, it's as if you have done it for me..." See also Psalm 139 & Psalm 103.

Recollect a time when... *someone helped you some how and you thanked God for them; *you helped someone and it was a blessing to yourself to have helped them; *you appreciated something in nature and it turned your thoughts to God; *something surprising happened and you suspect that God was behind it.

Deliberately try to bump into God during this week – perhaps at least 7 times. Keep a record of your encounters. You could invite some friends to share the experiment. Get together a week later and share your suspicions about where you think God might have been reaching out to you.

Plan some ways to show God's love to people during this week.



Hi, and welcome to this collection of stories. I hope they feel like a gift from God, to you. Now that you've had a sample, I guess you've figured out how the book works. Read the story. Contemplate, meditate, listen to what God might say in the quietness after the reading, talk to God about your thoughts or feelings, whatever works for you.

Some suggestions to help you squeeze some more juice out of the stories are offered at the end of each one. Some of the suggestions will work for groups of people sharing the story together as well as for private, personal reflection.

So, how did that first one go? Too mushy? Too obvious? Too long? Hey, you're welcome to play editor, you know. Get out the red biro and make it better for you. Seriously, get into it. Tackle it head on. Get involved with each story and wrestle it to the ground until it surrenders up something good for you.

*God bless you heaps.
Tom Kerr.*

Let There Be Light

Violent gash. The blue sky ripped open.
The sunset bleeds angry colours all across the horizon.
Heated yellows hanging on to the edge of the world for as long as they can.
The sun crumbles among the clouds and the flaming orange embers fall around the Earth, burning the carpeted green hills.
The bleeding reds spill outwards, then seep over to the other side of the turning planet.

Though the day is dying, it hangs on grimly, pleading for just a few more minutes of life.
It's stained fingernails gouge deep into the blue and scratch and cut as it slides hopelessly downwards.
Losing the battle it can never win.

It begins to accept it now. After all, the Day knows its fate.
The bruised purples rise to the surface and the brilliant blue of the remaining daylight is dragged over the precipice as Day times claws relinquish their bloody grip.
The colours get over their shock and turn pale in their dying.
The sky calms down, to pastels, the pink, of blood now anaemic.

Soon even the pastels surrender. Darkness comes up on the opposite side of the battlefield, marching forward to claim its rightful reign of the Night.
It slaps the hands that have dug in so deep.
Daylight loses its grip completely. Quickly now, it is gone.
Darkness tidies up the bloody mess that was, sweeping the stains behind the hills.

The Night's time has come. It takes centre stage.
To celebrate, it scatters a generous sprinkling of stars all across the evening sky.
Like a sprinkler shooting out drops of electric luminous confetti that get stuck on a blue black sheet, and just glow there.
Like party lights. Like a million little sparklers.

Like giggling kids, twinkling and showing off and having fun and whispering secrets among themselves, secrets we'll never know – but that make us smile just the same.

A fat and full, shiny moon, rolls itself slowly up, spreading a buttery light. Too lazy to fight with the darkness, the moon is content to push just enough soot aside, to make a good passage for itself. Content in its own confidence. Once more the moon proves that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out. And at the sight of the master of ceremonies the stars settle down – well, just a little, just enough to stop them getting up to too much mischief.

Then the Night will proceed quietly.

And gently.

Trying to seep peace in to the human spirit.

Relax now people. Everything's going to be alright.

Absorb this gift.

Say your prayers and go to sleep.

The darkness is the Creator's sponge. Let it soak up your worries and draw them up to heaven where God will deal with them, tenderly.

Sleep now.

Be still.

Rest.

Then.

The curtain is raised. The stage is set ablaze with light. Daylight bursts on the scene. The whole heavenly orchestra is playing loudly like a rock band, with colours for sound. The different coloured notes are split across the lines as the conductor whips them up into a brilliant frenzy of light.

The heart of daylight pumps again and rays of light and colour squirt up over the horizon like so many damaged golden arteries. Bursting colours so powerfully and so passionately that the awakening, once grey, clouds blush with the colours of anticipation. A sky bursting with energy is here to stir you up and send you on your way.

“Come on. Come on. Get up!” it demands of you. Shafts of daylight come knocking on your forehead. The day will soon have your attention all over again. It is urgent and insistent, because, this day will not last forever. Make the most of it before it’s gone. When its time is up, the Day knows, it can only hang on for so long. So let’s go! Let’s get into it!

For Reflection

Think about night-time as a gift. And then daylight as a gift.

Why are some people afraid of the dark?

God assures us that, “The light shines in the darkness still, and nothing can ever put it out.”

John 1 v5. What might that mean for you?

Meditate on Genesis 1 v1-5 & v14-19.

Meditate on Christ as the light of the world. Read John 1 v1-5; 1 John 1 v5-7; Matthew 5 v14-16; Matthew 6 v22-23.

Light a candle, turn off the lights and pray in the quietness.

Yes!

Dawn was just breaking. The shafts of sunlight splitting the clouds on the horizon gave everything a golden glow. As I ran over the sand dune, the first glimpse of the ocean was all it took to know the surf was excellent. Peeling off perfectly, lefts and rights, a slight offshore breeze feathering the breaking sections of the waves.

I could feel the adrenalin surging through every muscle in my body. Excitement, sunlight and salt spray tingling on the skin.

There was only one other person on the beach. Down further where I planned to paddle out. A girl. A slight outward current to the left of her would be the place to get out through the white water and in to those fantastic waves. Planning, strategising, focusing on my plan of attack with surfing manoeuvres racing through my head. I couldn't get out there quick enough.

I dropped my gear, attached the leg rope, and stretched. I took a few deep breaths and tried to contain the adrenaline rush, to hold it back just a few seconds so I could take the whole scene in and appreciate it.

The sun-kissed sand, golden with sunlight. The waves glassy and transparent, tinted with the most beautiful blues and yellowy greens and their crests peaked, curved and then pitched out and over, the feathering white foam accentuating the colours around it. The girl was walking calmly towards the water, her long hair swaying gently against the curves of her beautiful back. She slid gracefully into the silky water, waste deep and stopped to caress the water around her. Her hands slid over the surface in long sweeping arks, ripples circling outward from both sides. She waited for the row of white water bouncing and churning towards her to be close enough, and then she gracefully dived under it. She came up and brushed the water from her face and smoothed it out of her hair. She played with the water at her sides again, now frothy, and waited for the next line of white water to come. She was gorgeous.

Out of nowhere three ominous grey shapes appeared in one of the waves. The shapes were charging along inside it, keeping pace with it. The girl must have seen it too, because her body stiffened with alertness. One of the shapes outran the wave and broke through in front of it, leaping out ahead of it, with this enormous grin on its face. Dolphins playing with the waves. The next one copied the first and the third did the same. The girl relaxed. I think she might have even laughed. You could just tell those dolphins were having a great time surfing together.

Out past the dolphins wave, a bigger set of waves moved forward and took form, the crack of the first one as it broke was yelling at me to get out there now and get into it. I was suddenly aware of the cacophony of sounds that, for a second, seemed almost deafening – the breaking waves, the roaring white water, the squawking sea gulls and my heartbeat pounding like a drum.

The beauty of it all was overwhelming. Surely there is a God and surely that God must really love us!

For Reflection

Has nature ever overwhelmed you with its beauty? Remember and relive some of the most beautiful experiences you have had with creation. Write or draw about such an experience.

How much does creation draw your thoughts towards God? If you want to have a long chat with God, where do you find is a good place for prayer? Why is that place special?

Check out Psalm 8 and Psalm 148 in the Bible.

The guy is checking out the girl on the beach. He thinks she's gorgeous. Is that pervy or is that okay? Why do you reckon that? What's the difference between appreciating someone's good looks and pervy?

Read Matthew 5 v 27-30; Genesis 2 v 18-24; Proverbs 7 v 1-27.

Down By The Waterfall

The water was cool and refreshing. The young man pulled himself up and out on to a large rock beside the pool. He could feel the spray-mist from the waterfall caress against his wet skin. With a little shiver, he then jumped from rock to rock until he found a place in the sun.

He stroked the water from his skin in strong squeezing motions as if he was wringing himself dry, his hands flowing over the well-defined muscles of his young and perfect body. It felt great to be naked like this.

He stretched towards the sky, arms pushing as far as they could go, legs extending until he was up on the tips of his toes. He enjoyed the feeling of the stretching muscles, of the warm sun on his skin, of absolute peace.

Lying on the flat bed of rock at the pool's edge, legs stretched out, he pressed as much skin as possible down against the warmth of the sun-heated rock. Then placing his hands beneath his head as a pillow, he looked up at the sky. He watched the clouds float by. He listened to the birds, the roar of the waterfall, and to the silence beyond the sounds...

He imitated the bird's calls. He talked to God. He thought about life and this beautiful part of creation. Rolling over to lie face down, he reached out to dangle a hand in the water. Swirling it back and forth he watched the reflection of his face breaking into weird patterns. It was so peaceful here. So quiet within the roar of the waterfall's sound.

He was content, but not completely. The solitude was beautiful but yet, it was also too much. He was alone, too alone. Something was missing in paradise.

It made him a little sad and sleep was an inviting escape from the familiar loneliness that was beginning to stir up again in him.

Stretched out naked like that beside the pools, she thought he was absolutely glorious. This was the first time she had ever seen a man like this, and felt she had never seen anything so beautiful before.

From the top of the waterfall, behind the hibiscuses, she had a great view with little chance of him seeing her. She had been watching him swimming, stretching, hopping from rock to rock.

And now as he slept her eyes wandered up and down the muscled and tanned length of his body. So strong. So handsome. So sweet in his innocence. And yet she felt sorry for him too. He seemed so sad in his aloneness.

She clambered down the rock wall beside the waterfall, slipped quietly into the water and swam towards him. She reached the edge not far from him and silently eased out of the water so that she would not wake him. He didn't stir. He was in a deep sleep. She wrung the water out from her beautiful long hair, the water droplets splashing ever so close to his now completely dry skin. She inched closer and squeezed her hair again so that just one droplet of water splashed on the stone and a tiny particle landed on his arm. She was sure he gave a little shiver and goose bumps appeared around the droplet. She giggled with delight.

Like a game she would tell him about later, she mimicked the way he had stretched towards the sun before, and stifled another giggle. Stretching, reaching to the heavens. Stroking the water from the length of her body, her hands flowing over her own glorious lines and curves, pushing the chilly water away. Her skin pulled tight with the coldness, her muscles contracted firm and hard, she felt as solid as the rock she stood on. The sun warmed and caressed her fresh, young, glowing, pretty skin.

The rocks, also warm from the sun, felt delicious as she sat down beside him, looking him over from up close now. She watched his body rise and fall with his breathing and marvelled at the wonder of it all. He was so beautiful! She looked around at the pool, at the waterfall, at the clear blue sky above the forests canopy, and at the puffy white clouds as they ambled across the sky. She listened to all the sounds. She felt all the sensations of her tingling skin against rock, against air, and kissed with just a hint of

the waterfall's mist. It was all so perfect. It was complete. She thanked God for the wholeness, the harmony, the peace she felt. She looked at her reflection on the water, beside this man. Stretching out, she brushed her hand across the surface gently. The ripples of her reflection and the man's came together, overlapped, merged and became one.

Then lying on the rock beside him, she curled up facing him, closed her eyes and fell asleep.

And that would be how he would find her when he awoke, her asleep with an innocence and beauty, and already in love with him.

For Reflection

Some people have strange ideas about God and sexuality. I remember taking a class of 16 year old students where I was asked, "Why is God against sex?"

I was a bit surprised, both by the question and by the answer that jumped out of my mouth. "Hey, God's not against sex! He invented it. The first thing God ever told people to do was to go forth and multiply!" (Genesis 1 v 26 - 31)

Now that's not a commandment a God who doesn't like sex gives to the very first people who come along now is it?

When you read the next part of the creation story, and use just the slightest bit of sensitivity, intuition and imagination, you realise that God is quite a romantic really. (Genesis 2 v 18 - 25)

It's not good for the man to be alone. So God makes a beautiful companion for him. God knows what's inside Adam's heart and soul. He knows Adam's need for the company of someone like himself. Someone he can relate to and yet who is somehow different as well. Complimentary and supplementary to him. God understands because after all, God didn't like being alone either - that's why he got started with people.

And so Eve is formed from out of Adam's inner most being, from his need to give and receive love and affection; to admire and be admired; to give to and to receive from. All the things that were closest to Adam's heart, that's what God made Eve out of. All the things that would be close to Eve's heart, Adam had already been designed for. They became God's gift to each other.

And when Adam awakes and discovers Eve, he says, "At last! Here is one of my own kind." I reckon that's just a summary of what he actually said. I can imagine lots of other things he might have expressed at that time. Mainly along the lines of joy, wonder and delight – but I bet he had to catch his breath first.

When Adam and Eve are presented to each other they are naked and not at all embarrassed. God doesn't bother with any gift wrapping paper around these particular presents. They get the full picture in all its breath taking beauty right from the start. There is a lovely innocence in this, and a purity, and definitely a powerful sensuality at the same time. Isn't that how our sexuality should be even today – honest, vulnerable, trusting, sharing, innocent and pure before God and each other? I wonder if we are still capable of such a way with our sexuality.

Adam and Eve are made for each other. There is no one else in the whole world for them. They only have eyes for each other. And they both really like what they see. If sensuality and sexuality weren't part of the picture, the command to go forth and multiply would make no sense. Powerful attraction to each other was a given necessity. You'll notice they had no trouble obeying this particular suggestion. Keeping away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a different matter. But multiplication – no problem's with that one.

That's the platform on which the Bible's teaching about relationships between men and women begins.

So why is it do you think, that sexuality isn't celebrated in worship services? Why don't you hear people thanking God for love and mutual desire in the open prayer times at Church. How come there are no hymns praising God for sex?

Well, maybe it's not because we are ashamed of it – I hope not at least. Perhaps it's because it is so sacred and special, that the intimacy of it, and joy of it, can best be shared in the context of the bond that can exist between a loving couple and God. It is exclusive. That's part of what makes it so delicious – it's something that only the two of you will share together under God's blessing. It's yours alone together.

Some people have such weird attitudes about sex. There are some people who think of it as a leisure activity, or as a score card that somehow proves how good you are, or as a competition, or as a way to manipulate or control others. Then there are others who build so many taboos around it that it becomes a nightmare rather than a dream come true even in their own marriage.

Keeping the Genesis story in mind, come up with 3 guidelines about sex, and explain how each relates to a part of the Genesis story. (And it's okay to have fun doing this!)

Read Song of Songs chapter 1. Have a go at rewriting some parts of this chapter. See if you can make yourself blush but at the same time keep it holy and reverent. If you are married, how about addressing it to your spouse and reading it to them, or sending it to them in a letter.

As an alternative way of celebrating our sexuality, go back over the story, "Down By The Waterfall" and write a chapter 2 for it, where Adam wakes up and discovers Eve there with him.

Being sexual creatures is a wonderful part of how we are created. But it sure takes a lot of management to keep it under control. For many of us it is one of the fiercest of all our desires. List some of the joys and struggles of being a sexual being.

Praise God for our sexuality. Pray for God's help in enjoying and also in managing our sexuality, so that it will be the blessing it's meant to be for us, rather than a curse for ourselves and those we are in relationships with.

God - The Match Maker

An advertisement from the personal columns.

Attractive, fresh young male, seeks suitable soul mate. Animals need not apply. Must be made in the image of God and somehow like me at the same time. Must be a good companion.

I enjoy running around the garden naked. I have no fashion sense and am not at all into clothes or big parties. (I don't even know what they are actually).

I'm a real nature lover. Creation is fantastic. In my spare time I like giving names to the animals. Animals are great, but I'm hoping for something more. Desperately wanting the right kind of friend.

Lonely, Adam.

For Reflection

Read Genesis Chapter 2. Consider how God designed us to need each other. Have a go at writing your own personal column ad, identifying your needs in a soul mate or spouse. Or, you could write one for Eve to match Adams.

Of All God's Good Gifts

If I had to choose, and I could choose only one, of all God's good gifts, I know what it would be.

Would it be the moon shining in the night, embracing the warm light of the sun, nursing the warmth to itself, and then delivering it gently to the Earth, as sweetly as a blown kiss?

Or would you choose instead the myriads of stars twinkling, sparkling, shining, bursting with glorious light, like sparks from the fire that have ascended into the heavens to be frozen forever in time and space?

No, neither.

Would it be the waves of the sea, crystal blue-green clear, triumphantly charging in uniform rows of fluid motion to pound themselves upon the sandbanks? Or would you choose instead the dolphins that ride those waves, creatures so sleek, so fast, so playful and full of fun with their crazy acrobatics and their cheeky grins.

Ah, how I love the sea and all that's therein, but no. If I could choose only one from all of God's good gifts, I would have to let these go.

What then? What would you choose? Diamonds and jewels, precious and rare, as clear as liquid, as cool as ice, but as solid and heartless as any other rock. Or perhaps you'd choose the flowers, caressing us with their colours and their perfumed scents, surrendering themselves completely to any who would pick them, without complain nor resistance, giving themselves up like the true gift that they are?

No.

Waterfalls then? Would you choose the waterfalls, cascading down the mountains, recklessly throwing themselves over the cliffs with total abandon, crashing on the rocks below, disintegrating into spray and mist, only to surface again in the cool calm pool below, as if nothing had ever happened.

Or would it be those cotton wool clouds, puffing and whispering around in the sky immaculately blue? Or maybe the rain pouring on us like some bucket in heaven being tipped, like some kind of water fight joke on a cosmic scale, spilling from heaven like God's love itself...invigorating, refreshing, cleansing and giving new life if only we will take it in?

Is that it? No?

What then? What would you choose?

If I could choose only one thing, it would have to be this.

Friends like you.

For Reflection

What are some of your favourite colours? Favourite taste sensations? Favourite touching sensations – eg, silk on your skin, sand running through your fingers...Favourite smells? Favourite sounds?

What are the five most precious gifts from God in your life?

Who do you think of when you read this story?

Turn the story into a poster, and do illustrations all around the border. You could give it to a good friend. You could put it up in your house and when friends visit, ask them to read it and tell them that's how you feel about them.

Visit, ring up, email or write to some of the people you love, just to let them know you love them and appreciate them.

Give thanks to God for all his good gifts to you.

The Claim

I have staked my claim on your heart; marked out a large and beautiful section of your affections and said, "This space is for us!"

And you said lovingly, "Yes, this is where we will meet and be together."

But each time I return, the ground has shifted, the stakes have moved. New miners have taken slices of what I thought was ours alone. Or did you give that to them while we were apart? Either way, the claim gets smaller and smaller. We have less and less together in common.

I have begged, rolled over and even played dead for you. I have jumped through the burning hoop for you. I have performed and played up for your attentions. And you used to do the same for me. But now, like Pavlov's dog, I'm pampered menial, even for my best tricks. Muscles strained, heart pounding, fur singed, eyes stinging. But you are looking elsewhere. You are unaware of how much it hurts.

They say, "If you love it, let it go. If it returns to you, it is truly yours."

I can understand that. But is it cheating to spread the birdseed, to put out the bowls of honeyed water? Is it wrong to hold offerings up to the sky and to beg the wind to carry the scent your way?

I am the rodeo clown, waking up from a dream where I imagined I had tamed the wild, bucking bronco. The rodeo clown, waking up to the reality that even my best moves are foolishness in your sight.

Generativity versus self absorption; intimacy versus isolation; identity versus identity diffusion; autonomy versus shame and doubt; trust versus mistrust – these are all here in our friendship, and in the end it will be integrity versus despair. Right now, I'm backing despair.

The sunset phase sets in. And as the sun goes down, the colours turn the colour of wounded red, of bleeding hearts and fading light. Soon all will be pastels, then greys, then darkness.

I give up.

The Spirit of God will not always strive after man.

It is finished.

For Reflection

Read Exodus 20 v 1 – 6. Exodus 34 v 14 – 17; Deuteronomy 4 v 23 – 25; Joshua 24 v 19 – 27; 1 Corinthians. 10 v 18 – 22.

God tells us that he is a jealous God. What does that mean for your relationship with God?

If we use the analogy of God being like a lover to you...

Is God still chasing after you, trying to win you over?

Are you and God still madly in love?

Would God feel neglected by you?

Would God feel that you are cheating on him?

Would God think you have dropped him altogether?

Do you feel as if God has given up on you?

Can God ever give up on someone? Does there come a point where God no longer chases, cajoles, implores, calls or strives after a person's affections?

Read Genesis 6 v 1 – 8. Try reading it from old versions as well, eg. King James.

Where are you and God at in your relationship? Where would you like to be at?

What would you need to do to get there? What would God need to do to get there?

Use these questions to form the content of a letter that you write to God.

Pray your letter when it's finished. Keep it. Read it in a months time – in a years time – and again in five years time.

Reflect on Romans 10 v 1 – 21.

The Light ~ Losin' It

I think people are having any faith they might have had, whittled away. Little by little, step by step, God is being pushed aside.

We used to have Easter each year to remind us of eternal life, forgiveness through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, and God reaching out to save us.

Well the Easter Bunny got hold of all that stuff and shoved it down the bottom of his fluffy little basket. Now it's got all of us hopping around, spending up big and splashing chocolate eggs at each other as if they are some very special gift. Guess who the real Easter Bunnies are!

You ask some people about the meaning of Easter and they'll start telling you about the ancient fertility rites of Druids or some such rubbish.

Then we've got Christmas...or rather, then we don't have Christmas. Santa's now got that one well and truly in the bag. Santa has become the chief of staff among materialism's demons.

Well, at least we've got churches all over the place to remind us of God's presence in our world. Yeah, but, who goes?

On Sundays, three out of every four people are either, working to serve the almighty dollar; off at the beach; playing sport; watching sport; complaining that there's nothing but sport on the tele; recovering from the grog up the night before; sleeping in; reading the newspaper or bugging their neighbours with the lawn mower.

God? What God? You say "God" to the average Australian and they are quite comfortable until they realise you're not swearing.

So God is a fringe dweller. By people's choice.

And how is that working out for us? Well, we are suiciding; abusing drugs, medicines and alcohol; catching S.T.D. s and dying of A.I.D.S. at an ever increasing rate. We are working our guts out – literally – as stress gnaws away at so many people’s lives, for more and more money with longer and longer working hours and less and less satisfaction.

Our society allows more freedoms with God conveniently out of the way. You can be gay, bi, trans, a or straight. You can have sex before, during, after and in spite of marriage – de facto or celebrated. So marriage, (de facto or celebrated), is nothing special. So why bother getting married? Why commit to each other? Fine. Whatever. If it works for you then, that’s supposed to be okay. Who am I to question in this pluralistic society ?

But try this. Ask a few kids who their real parents are. Take note of how many are giving fairly complicated answers, to what ought to be an easy question. Then project into the future. These kids work on the existing model for relational patterns of family life and dissolve it by the same proportion their parents used to dissolve the pattern given by their grandparents and ..well, go figure. Then go talk to an officer at your local Juvenile Aid Bureau about the impact of family life on the crime rate, suicide rate etc.

But hey, adults have a right to get what they want out of life. They can’t be expected to always put their life on hold for their kids can they? What ever works for you right? Look after number one. The basic community unit was once the village. Then it was the extended family. Then it was the nuclear family. Now it’s the individual. Soon it will be the fragments of the individual.

Look, the magazines assure us that 85% of people are doing it, so it must be absolutely okey dokey for us to do it too. There was a T.V. story where the people who did it said it was great. “It” being pretty much anything your lusts or greed’s desire. It must be okay, because we see it over and over again, every night on our teles. We are trained in it. Shown the most explicit details of how to do it. And if we ever did decide, “No, that’s wrong!” well, hey, you’ve been taught the techniques, in case you ever want to change your mind.

And so the six year old knows how to load the gun in mum's cupboard and shoots a playmate for calling him crazy. The teenager has already seen a hundred other's take their lives, and it didn't look too bad on the screen.

A desperate mum has been educated by the current affairs about how you go about working the system for abuse of sedatives. Etc.

The government, waking up, (too late), to the fact that the bill they are paying to pick up the pieces of a society that is breaking down and cracking up, is exorbitant, decides, not for stronger censorship, but for some reality adds that tell it like it is. They don't work, because the truth to the glorification ratio is at one to a thousand. The way to hell is paved with T.V. sets.

Count all the screens in your house and it's a short trip to discover why our kids are getting fatter. Australians argued for years over liberating ourselves from the Monarchy. The Monarchy? That's nothing. Try liberating people from the screen. That's where the power is.

So while we race about our lives at a manic pace, laughing it all off with the latest joke pulled off the net, the big questions go begging - not for answers just yet, but first for someone intelligent enough to ask them. What is this life for? What is right and what is wrong? Is there a better way to live? Are we alone in the universe or is there...No! Not life on other planets, a life on this planet that's worth living? Is there a God? If so, does he or she care? Can God get involved? Can I get in touch with God somehow? Operator, information, get me Jesus on the Internet. But there are so many religions, how do we know which one is right? (Don't be fooled by that one. It just means, "I'll pretend I'm confused, that way I won't have to commit."). The World is in such a mess, but what can I do about it? Knock, knock. Hang on, there's someone at the door. "Would I care to make a donation to Life Line?" No thanks.

We close the door. Now where was I? Oh yeah, the world is in such a mess, but what can I do about it? See, "How can there be a loving God, when there are all these starving millions?" we ask our selves as we kick off our designer sandals that would have fed a child for a year.

Questions, questions, why all these questions? Who cares? Life's short, play hard. Party on, dude. It's Lotto night. When I win, then I'm going to help all my friends.

Who wants to be a millionaire? I do. And our new contestant comes from Queensland. Geoff is a nuclear physicist, who, with his partner, has three gene spliced and attributes selected children, none of whom will have any discernable genetic disorders or trend flaws. Geoff's home viewer tonight is Bob, who sits on his butt all night hoping for a better life, dreaming of greater wealth won through gambling, and channel surfing past the stories about genocides, wars, the homeless and the helpless. Good luck Bob.

Geoff will be playing against our current champion, Cindy. "Hi, my name is Cindy. I'm an aerobics instructor and I like nothing better than to work out at the gym six days a week. On the seventh, I like to party hard at the night club and get faceless and legless, hoping to get lucky."

Good luck Cindy. Okay contestants, here's our first question.

"Why did Leonardo da Vinci suppress his plans for the invention of the submarine?"

Buzz. Yes Geoff? "He kept it under wraps because of the evil nature of humanity. He guessed someone might use the submarine to, 'practise assassinations at the bottom of the sea.'"

That's absolutely correct.

Enough. Enough of this stupidity.

The world needs a revolution. We all individually need a revolution. And if you've already had one, are you about ready for another one?

Enter Jesus. The light has come into the world but the people preferred the darkness. Well, not me. Not any more. Jesus is the light showing a way through this crazy fog. As we bump around in this darkness, the voice of Jesus calls out to us, to take his hand and to let him lead us to a better way of living.

A “Yes!” to Jesus is a “Yes!” to enlightenment. Jesus brings a new clarity and understanding. He helps us realise that we matter. And so do the people around us - all the people around us.

He helps us realise that life is sacred, all of it. Sex, friendship, work, play, responsibilities, laughter, tears,.. all of it is sacred. Life is not about just earning money, or buying more and more gizmos, or getting the perfect body, or having the ultimate thrill, or dressing for success, or partying till you puke, or being at the top, or having power over others or being sports person of the year.

Jesus can save us from trivialising our precious lives away. He can put us on a track where the ultimate goals are to love God and to love others, with a love that is honourable, courageous and generous. He will enlist us in the fight against all that is evil in this world. He calls us to be a part of a family where all can embrace each other as brothers and sisters in God's love. He can free us from the tyranny of being enslaved to our egos, our sex drives, our bank accounts and loans, our party tricks, our artificial highs or anything else that holds us back from experiencing life, life in all its magnificent fullness.

Or, we can keep going as we are.

For Reflection

Go through the story again. Put ticks beside the parts you agree with; crosses against the parts you don't; question marks against the parts you don't understand; and exclamation marks against the parts that really make you think.

Imagine all traces of Christianity were erased from Australian society. How would things be different? (eg. There would be no Life Line, Kids Help Line, St Vincent de Paul's, Teen Challenge etc. Therefore there would be...)

Get hold of some popular magazines aimed at teens or adults. Identify the articles that God might be impressed by and those he might be disappointed by.

If God became the editor of one of these magazines, what would God do articles on?
What adds would he allow in and not allow in? Who would be on the cover and why?
Who would buy it?

Around Easter or Christmas time, collect evidence that their true spiritual significance has been high jacked.

Consider Matthew 6 v 19 – 7 v 29 and Luke 12 v 13 – 34 against the story.
Reflect on John 1 v 1 – 18 and 1 John 1 v 1 – 2 v 17.

Will

The tall barbed wire fences could keep back the leafy tentacles of the jungle, but nothing could hold back its steamy heat. In the huts, the skinny, scrawny men lay sweating on their bunks, exhausted. Exhausted from the heat, from hard labour, from hunger and from hopelessness.

And yet in one hut an extra flicker of hope survived. It was sparked up and rekindled each night as Smithy told the story. He held the Will and with it an obligation to keep hope alive.

And so, each night in the darkness and the sweat, Smithy's words rose up and wafted around the hut, dabbing hope, like a cool sponge on the men's foreheads. For some, it was all they had.

The ceremony commenced each night with the sound of paper unfolding in the dark, as Smithy pulled out the Will and read from it.

"I, Queen Leahsieli of Samoa, do hereby swear that the owner of this Will holds the right to treat Little Tusey Island as their own for one hundred years."

The sparks of hope were ignited again. Smithy, whose own grasp of life was weakening day by day, fanned the sparks into flickers with his exuberant descriptions of the beautiful tropical island that would be his as soon as the war was over. He described at length and with careful attention to detail, the colours of the sea, the caress of the breeze, the stillness of the sunset, and the beauty of the natives – the women in particular, of course.

Having painted the picture, each night a different mate from the hut would sail with Smithy to visit his island. Every time, in his predictable but hilarious way, Smithy was the hero and his mate the bumbling fool. Big Smithy won the ladies hearts, but the girls would only giggle at how scrawny Pete was. Clever Smithy caught 30 coral trout from the canoe in the time it took Red to bring up one toadfish. Brave

Smithy led the natives in gallant battle against the Filipino pirates, while Spud was stuck on the toilet with a severe case of the tropical runs.

They were great stories, and laughter lived up to its reputation as good medicine. They all knew the secret of the Will, and knowing the truth of it made it all the more delicious.

When the new boy, Jarvis, had been captured and brought in, he drank in the nightly story with as much relish as anyone. Over the nights, weeks and months, he developed a passion for Smithy's island, always interrupting with questions, always wanting to know more. It became a great joke among the other men. More than once they asked Jarvis to cover his face at night so that the green glow of envy wouldn't keep them all awake.

Smithy's last night on Earth was electric with energy. He was not at all well, but even so the excitement kept him hanging on. News had come through that they'd soon be free. The bombings in the distance, the diminishing number of guards confirmed that it must be true.

He told the story that night with all the gusto he could muster and tonight, everyone got to sail in for an island party. There was an enormous feast held in honour of all his mates. There was tons of sea food, exotic island drinks, gorgeous dancing girls and enough bliss to make their eyes water. There were loved ones there. There was peace, freedom, health, harmony and beauty.

The story went long into the night. Different men took turns to help keep the story going when Smithy got too weak. But if anyone except Smithy started to look heroic, Smithy would jump back in and correct things, so that he was the big kahuna again. Eventually the story laid its contented head on an island girl's lap and was gently stroked to sleep.

Long after all the other men were asleep, the green glow of Jarvis's envy nagged at his mind, tore at his soul, grew legs, arms and evil hands that slithered him over to Smithy's bed.

The pillow found its way on to his weakly gasping face and the will in Smithy's pocket found its way in to Jarvis's pocket.

The next morning he told the men a story of his own, of how Smithy, with his last gasping breath, had called to him and asked him to take care of his island, and handed him the Will.

He took it out to show them, unfolding it to read it for the first time in the light of day. But it was blank. On both sides.

The men were silent. Here was the secret, the truth of the story.

The reality dawned on Jarvis slowly at first. And then more quickly and more powerfully. Then so powerfully that Jarvis's green demon leapt from his soul, stared him in the face, clutched at his throat, squeezed at his heart and snatched his legs out from under him.

For Reflection

Which of the following are you most likely to envy of others. Their... good looks, strength, health, popularity, wealth, skills, partner, sense of humour, self esteem, reputation, spirituality, leadership skills, freedom... other.

Work through the passages below to do a study on envy.

Passage	Envious Character	Envious of...	Outcome
Genesis 4:1 – 16			
Genesis 37: 1 – 36			
Daniel 6: 1 – 14			
Matthew 27: 15 – 26			
Acts 13: 42 – 52			
Acts 8: 4 – 24			

Two other passages to study:

Psalm 73. Author's problem? Solution? How did they arrive at that solution?

Ecclesiastes 4: 4 – 8 & 6: 9.

Think of 4 ways to combat envy or jealousy.

If any one were to envy you, what might it be for?

What's something you want more than anything else? Can you work towards achieving it?

Can you remember an experience where envy has had a damaging effect on a relationship?

Too Easy

You should know better. You've made this mistake before. The scars and the pain are still there to remind you. You *know* there are usually strings attached to these things. You know there are no free lunches in this world. But it's just so tempting.

This piece of flesh is easy meat. This bit of skin dancing before you, swaying with the rhythm, floating around ever so close to you, inviting you, hypnotising you.

It just wants to be taken. You know the moves to get it too. It's just waiting for you to have your way with it. And it looks *so* good.

You are hungry for it now. Your appetite grows fiercer by the second, urging, gnawing, pushing, driving.

And it's almost too easy. No wooing required. No prolonged chase needed here. No hard work, no big effort. Easy meat. Just cruise over and take it. Go for it.

So you do. And it feels good. All over in a flash. Casually turning to go, thinking how clever you are, how smoothly you moved in for the kill – when a rod somewhere unseen jerks up.

The line snaps taut. The taken bait splits. The hook bites through, piercing something deep inside of you. Cut and bleeding. Stunned. Shocked. Hooked.

You're being reeled in now. Powerless against it. Resistance is painful. The hook bites deeper when you pull against it.

You figure it's better to surrender to it. It all happened so fast. You're not in control anymore. Go with it. That will give you time to work things out, to think things through. It hurts less this way. Just go with it while you plan your next move.

You've been here before and escaped. You tore yourself away last time, and though it ripped you apart, you lived to tell the tale.

But this time the hook is too deep, the pull too strong. Resistance hurts too much. So you go along with it further. It can't be any worse than the agony of fighting it, can it?

Oh yes. Oh, yes it can be worse. Time's up. You are caught. You're a goner.

You fell for it, hook, line and sinker. Bang, you're dead.

Temptation and sin.

Satan also is a fisher of men.

For Reflection

Winning Over Sin

* Realise that we are called to excellence. Matthew 5 v 13 – 16 & v 48;

Philippians 2 v 15 – 16.

* Know your weaknesses. Admit your mistakes. Confess them to God. Psalm 32.

Psalm 51

* Take steps to change. Repent. Replace the sin with a corresponding virtue.

James 1 v 12 – 25; 2 Chronicles 7 v 14.

* Avoid and resist temptation. Galatians 5 v 13 – 25; 6 v 1 – 5 & 7 – 10;

1 Corinthians 10 v 12 – 13; Romans 7 v 14 – 8 v 17

* Accept forgiveness and God's love. 1 John 1 v 5 – 9; Psalm 103 v 10 – 13; Psalm

130; Romans 8 v 31 – 39.

* Use spiritual weapons against spiritual attacks. Matthew 4 v 1 – 11; Ephesians 6 v 10 – 18.

Facing temptation? Prayerfully work through the following steps.

Be clear about what's right and what's wrong. Know why one is right and the other wrong. Work out the consequences of continuing the sin both in the short term and in the long term. Also work out the benefits of avoiding that sin. Decide to beat it now, before it's hold on you grows stronger.

Get help if you need to – enlist an ally, a support group, a mentor, a confessor, a spiritual director – someone who will hold you accountable and will check up on you. Be prepared to reciprocate support for them. Avoid tempting situations and catalysts. Exercise and develop self-control. Realise it could be a long drawn out battle. Don't make excuses for yourself when you fail, but don't give up on yourself either. Seek God's help. Put pleasing God as a priority above pleasing yourself or pleasing others. Enjoy the benefits that come from doing the right thing – celebrate victories.

What other strategies would you suggest?

Thou Shalt Not Covet

It was a good swell. One and a half to two metres, glassy conditions and breaking cleanly with long walls and tubing on the take off.

The sets came in three waves, with a few minutes lull in between, giving you plenty of time to paddle back to the take off spot without getting hammered on the inside. It was the kind of day many surfers would call perfect.

In the lull, a surfer paddled back to his take off spot, and while he waited for the next set, he sat on his board looking at the luxury high rise units towering from the headland. He saw the people on their balconies looking out over the sea. He saw the man on the balcony of the penthouse unit, sipping a drink with his beautiful wife by his side.

“That guy has got it all” the surfer thought. “What I wouldn’t give to be in his shoes. Just imagine waking up every morning and being able to walk out on your front veranda and check the surf all down the beach. The money that guy must have! A rich guy, living in his penthouse, with a beautiful wife, probably a flash car and all the luxuries money can buy, living right on the point. Right on the headland! Unbelievable. Here I am with not even a thousand dollars in the bank and a dead end job. Man, my life sucks.”

The sets came in and he took off on the biggest wave. The take off was good and he was straight into the tube, the section evened out and he shot out of the green room and gave a big aggressive carving cutback towards the foam, then slammed off the white water to turn back along the wave. Another steep section now, just right for a vertical off the lip and as the wave closed out down the line he arced up to the top of the wave and floated across the breaking section then went down with the white water, keeping his balance right to the end, then tearing into the white water and diving under it to paddle back out for more. His surfing seethed with resentment.

On the balcony of the penthouse, the rich guy watched the surfers ride. “Wow, did you see that one?” he asked his wife. “That guy is hot! What a great ride. What an excellent surfer! You know, a guy like that has got it all really. Young, fit and healthy, with his whole life ahead of him. What I wouldn’t give to be in his shoes. Just imagine waking up every morning and being able to race down the beach, have a morning surf, go to some cruisey, low stress job, then at the end of the day leave it all behind you at the office and head right down to the beach again for another surf. The level of fitness that guy must have! And see how well he rides – he just defies gravity all the time. A young good looking surfer, living the simple life, with a beautiful girlfriend out there surfing with him, probably driving some old bomb that cost a few hundred bucks and not a care in the world. Unbelievable. Here I am working my guts out for all the expensive toys money can buy, but no time to enjoy them and too stressed to ever really live – wondering what’s the point of it all anyway. Man, my life sucks.”

He shook his head, sculled the rest of his drink and turned to go inside. Time to get ready for another long day at the office.

Reflection

Counting your blessings is an old idea with timeless application. We can get so busy concentrating on the things we don’t have, that we never appreciate how much we do have going for us. So, give it a go, count your blessings! Think of all the good things in your life.

Given that we are constantly bombarded with advertisements, do you suspect that there would be a direct correlation between people’s level of satisfaction and their level of television viewing, magazine reading or even visits to shopping centres?

List some of your recurring whinges about life, or recurring wishes. Now imagine telling them to a person from a third world country. A group activity could be built around dramatising this idea.

Who are you envious of?

Have you ever thought someone had their lives totally together and wished you had their life, only to find out later that they have their serious struggles and down times too? If so, what's the lesson in that for you?

One of the Ten Commandments warns us against coveting, (Exodus 20 v 17). Why might a loving God warn us against this mistake?

You think you've got it tough? Read 2 Corinthians 11 v 23-33.

Think about Christ's sufferings and compare them with your feelings of being hard done by. Matthew. 27 v 27 - 50.

Give up a prayer of thanksgiving for all the good things in your life.

Newspaper Lives

Newspaper lives. That's what we've got.

A mixture of mayhem and miracles; scandals and triumphs; gossip and truth; depravity and victory; trials and tribulations; wars and the rumours of wars; chaos, control, and comic strips; titillation, trivia and tripe.

I heard once that there was a paper that printed only good news!

Only good news!!

Nobody much bought it though.

A bit like Jesus really, isn't it?

Only good news. Purity.

Nobody much bought it though.

This is how the judgment works; the light has come into the world, (nobody much bought it though), but people like the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil (John 3:19).

Better to curse the candle than bring light to the darkness.

Let those without stones cast the first sin.

For Reflection

Identify the good, the bad the ugly things in your life and in your personality.

Give thanks for the good, confess the rest.

Ask God to show you the areas of your life where you are deliberately shutting out His light, where you are running away from His demands.

What are you going to do about them?

Malady in M Major

Malformed, maladapted, maladjusted, and maladroit – is it any wonder I'm malfunctioning.

Malcontent – and that's no malapropism.

Malafide, malfeasance, malversation, malevolent malefactor.

Malicious malediction.

All maleficent to the maker.

Let's cut the malarkey

And make room for the Messiah.

DAMN IT!

Slam the door in the world's face.

That's what I would do if I was God.

Grab it with both hands and crush it like an eggshell. That's what I'd do.

Shake the thing until all of humanity just fell off it.

Move the sun right next door and incinerate planet Earth.

Pack my bags and leave the human race to its own destructive devices.

That's what I'd do if I was God.

It's a good thing I'm not God.

Thankfully, God would never do that.

He wouldn't do that.

Would he?

For Reflection

Give God ten good reasons why God shouldn't wipe us all out and start again like he did with the flood.

If you were God, how would you deal with the sins of the world?

The Icon

It was a dream. I know it was a dream. It had to be. But it was so real! I'm not very religious, but this morning, I said The Lord's Prayer for the first time in ages. "Our Father, who is in heaven... forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us... amen." Maybe that's what did it. I don't know.

Anyway, here's what happened. I was at the computer. I'd brought up the file on my "friend". That's where I keep a record of all the selfish, rotten, rude, manipulative, dishonest and generally bad things my so called friend has ever done. It was a big file. I'd been working on it for almost two years now.

When I've got the two years worth, I'm going to email it to everyone we both know. It's time everyone knew how low this person really is.

I finished listing their latest crimes for the week. Then I went back to the very beginning to check over all the entries, listed by dates, making sure I'd saved them all. There was a lot to read. I especially enjoyed reading the ones that I had put an asterisk beside. Those were the ones that really made my blood boil. This person is such a nasty piece of work!

Anyway, I'd got to around Easter time entries from last year, this foreign icon appeared in the bottom right hand corner of the screen. I lent in for a closer look. I couldn't believe it! It was a little picture of Jesus. The expression on his face was one of disappointment. Disappointment and anger.

I had no idea what was going on. As I focused back on my typing, something blipped on the screen. One of the asterisked entries had changed right before my eyes. I read the new text. It was totally different to anything I had put there. It was about teasing a poor little six year old kid, reducing them to tears. As I kept reading, I was just thinking that this wasn't something my friend had done at all, when it occurred to me, that it was something I had done. It was me when I was twelve.

Another asterisk flashed. That entry changed too. It was about when I had stolen money from my mum's purse when I was ten. Then the screen went wild. The file was speeding through page after page, and on each page the asterisked entries were all being changed. My name appearing in all of them. All of the entries now recording hurtful and bad things I'd done.

It stopped when it got to this week's records. There on that page were a combination of my friend's sins and my own with the asterisks beside them.

I tried to delete one of the stories about me, but when I did that, nothing disappeared – instead a fresh entry about me jumped up. I did it four times and four new stories came up, each one getting more personal, more embarrassing and more serious than the one before.

I don't know who could have this inside dirt on me, because I'm sure no one knew some of this stuff except me.

And maybe Jesus too I guess.

The Jesus icon in the corner of the screen grew a speech balloon. It said, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." I slumped back in to my chair. I tried to delete it, but each time I did that, it increased in size on the screen. That same look of disappointment and anger on Jesus face, getting bigger each time.

It took me a while to figure out what to do next, but eventually I got it. I slowly moved the mouse to one of the entries about my friend and tried to delete it. It worked, and each line about my friend I deleted, a line at the asterisks, about my sins, was erased too. For each sin of there's I deleted, one of my own got cancelled out.

I went at it with a vengeance then deleting huge blocks of typing at a time, then pages at a time. I was deleting as fast as I could, until, at last, there was nothing left. Nothing left of their sins, and nothing left of my own sins.

The speech balloon from the Jesus icon grew and grew until it took up the whole screen. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Then it caught fire in one corner and burned all the way across the screen, just leaving this kind of smoking ash when it was all burned.

Then I woke up. And here I am now, staring at the screen with all the entries about my friend still there and perfectly in tact. No entries about me. No Jesus icon.

Weird. Very weird. I rubbed my eyes and pushed my chair back. I pressed the keys to save the latest entries on my friend. I was just about to close down the file, when a little icon appeared in the corner.

For Reflection

James 4 v 11 – 12.

Matthew 6 v 12 – 15 & 7 v 1 – 5.

Matthew 18 v 21 – 35.

Amazing Grace

What is “grace” anyway? They say, “It is the undeserved favour of God.”

Great.

What does that mean?

This is what I reckon grace is like.

You’ve just kicked someone in the shins and then you realise you’ve lost your bus money. You’re desperate so you ask the person you’ve just kicked if you can borrow \$2. They say “Sure. In fact, let me give it to you rather than lend it to you. In fact, here, take \$5 in case you need more”.

That’s amazing grace.

This is what grace is like. You’ve just broken – well, smashed actually, a friend’s favourite toy and then you ask them if you can see their brand new birthday bike.

They say, “Sure. Would you like a ride? Would you like to borrow it for a day?”

That’s amazing grace.

This is what grace is like. You’ve taken a week off uni because the weather’s beautiful and it’s so nice on the beach and the waves are up. You go back to uni the next week all prepared to face the music. One of your lecturers bumps into you in the car park and asks where your assignment is. The one that was supposed to be handed in two weeks ago, but you were given an extension, which ran out last Monday.

You’d forgotten about it. You’re in shock. You admit you waggled last week and you still haven’t done it.

She asks you a few questions about the assignment content. You give your answers. She says, “You seem to know the material. Don’t bother about the assignment. I’ll give you a pass anyway.”

That’s amazing grace.

This is what grace is like. Your wife has just been out mowing the lawn, washing the car, trimming the hedge, ironing the clothes and painting the house (all before 9am). She comes in and you say to her, "Good morning, dear, how about a cup of coffee?" And she says, "Sure, would you like me to fix you a five course meal for breakfast too?" and she's not even being sarcastic. She actually does it! That's amazing grace.

This is what grace is. God gives you the most beautiful planet there is as a gift. He entrusts it and all the wonderful things on it into your care. He even gives you His most treasured possessions to enjoy –each other- and to look after. Then after awhile He sends you His son to give you a few tips on how to make the most of all these gifts. And what you do is, you spoil the planet, hurt the people and kill His son.

Then you realise what you've done and you say, "Sorry", and ask if you can start over. And God says, "Sure. No problem. I'll forgive you. And maybe I'd better give you my Holy Spirit as well to help you with your fresh start. I've bought Jesus back to life and He wants to help too. He'll always stay by your side to guide you, to support you, to encourage you, and to deal with your future mistakes as well. And while I'm at it, why don't I throw in eternal life as well for you. There you go. See how much I love you".

Now, that's Amazing Grace!!!

For Reflection

The story gives several examples of amazing grace, before talking about God's amazing grace towards us. Lengthen the story out by adding your own examples.

This story could be acted out while a narrator tells it. It also lends itself to cartoon illustration.

How about writing some new verses for the hymn *Amazing Grace* (No. 57 in *The Australian Hymn Book*.)

Think over some of the best expressions of love, forgiveness or generosity you have ever received. Talk these over with God; relive them with Him in prayer, enjoying them all over again, and thanking him for them.

Here's To The Rose Instead Of The Thorn

Here's to the thorn instead of the rose. The rose has been praised enough. Time for the thorn to be recognised. Strong defender. Clever protector. Perfect in design. Built for a purpose. Set with a mission from God.

The rose you must handle with care, lest you damage it. But the thorn? The thorn you handle with care for totally different reasons. To hurt the rose, you've got to get past the thorn. The thorn. You've got to admire it when you think about it.

And here's to the Remora instead of the shark. The shark has had enough power and glory. Remora, you brilliant fish! That's some work place you've chosen, little fish of courage and bravado. But hey, is there any living thing that's safer than you? The Remora. You've got to admire it when you think about it.

And here's to the bat instead of the dove. Yes, the Bat with its ugly little pushed in face and creepy skin for wings. The crazy thing sleeps upside down for goodness sake! And in the darkest of nights, in the pitch black of the night, in the light forsaken cave, where all hope would be lost for others, the bat sees all. The darkness is as light for the Bat - as it is for God her creator. This wild bird thing with built in sonar, flying through the blackness at breakneck speed. You've got to admire it when you think about it.

So here's to the hippo instead of the lion this time; and to the flea instead of the puppy for once. And, at last, here's to the ugly instead of the cute, the fat instead of the thin, the weak instead of the powerful, the poor instead of the rich, the sinner instead of the saint.

You've got to admire it when you think about it - the way Jesus lifted the lowered and lowered the lifted. Jesus knew what he was doing all along!

For Reflection

Remember any stories of people that were considered by others as losers, who Jesus loved and elevated?

Hunt through the gospels and find stories where Jesus related to children, women, the sick, the disabled, the deranged, the repentant sinners, etc. So how did he treat them?

Do you know the story of the Ugly Duckling? If you do, tell it. If you don't, find someone who does and ask them to tell it to you. Better still, track down a written version and read this classic story. It's a beauty!

How good are you at seeing the good in others around you? Do you rate people according to the norms of your culture or are you looking at people through God's eyes? Define the difference between the two before giving your answer.

Check these remarkable passages out!

Matthew 11 v 20 – 30; 1 Corinthians v 25 – 31; 1 Corinthians 3 v 18 – 23.

Body and Soul

I've been pumped up and then knocked flat. I've been cut up, turned inside out and had my world go belly up.

I've been kicked in the guts, slapped in the face, knifed in the back, had my arm twisted, my nose put out of joint, my tongue tied and my brow beaten.

I've had to take my foot out of my mouth so that I can eat my words and swallow my pride.

So I'm here, with my knees knocking, my legs turned to jelly with not a leg left to stand on, but caught flat footed just the same. My heart's all a flutter. I've gone lily livered. My stomach's tied in knots.

My hair has turned grey and now it's standing on end, I've got a pain in the neck, my ears are burning, eyes all cried out, hands wringing but my fingers are crossed because I'm coming to be with you.

Yes, I've come to you to spill my guts all over your table. Let's sift through them to see what's making me sick. Let's flip the lid on my head to see what's on my mind. I'll open my heart to you – here I'll get it, it's just there on my sleeve where I wear it. Let me shake out my bonnet and get rid of the bee. Perhaps you wouldn't mind flicking the chip off my shoulder, then we can try to match it with a few old blocks to find where it might have come from.

Ahh, that's better, my friend, my soul doctor.

All I needed was your listening ear and your shoulder to cry on.

Sometimes that's all it takes.

For Reflections

Who listens, really listens to you?

Who do you really listen to?

Have you ever tried listening to God – for God's sake, not yours?

The Therapist

Oh I know that therapists aren't supposed to get too involved with their clients, but I can't help it. You see, to me they aren't just clients. They are my brothers and sisters, my mothers and fathers, people that really matter to me. I care deeply for them.

When they come to me with a problem, it is such a wonderful privilege. We link our lives together and I walk with them through the tunnel of darkness, until a light begins to shine at the end. Our hearts connect through their pain and sorrow. My heart goes out to them. Their hearts reach out for comfort and healing. And for that time while our hearts are out there, in the open, reaching out to each other, our hearts meet and meld. It is a wonderful experience of love.

And when that light appears at the end of their tunnel, and their hope and confidence grows with each step they take, I am so happy for them. It's like when a parent has been teaching their child to ride a bike. The time comes when they don't need you to hold on any more and they can ride away on their own. And you are so proud of them.

But it hurts too. What hurts is that after all that wonderful exchange of love and trust and pain and empathy, as their pace picks up and they push joyfully into the light of a new day, they don't take me with them. They leave me back in the tunnel. They leave me standing empty handed as they ride off, never to return. Their need is over. They have moved on and I'm not part of the good times ahead.

If they ever come back, it's usually because they have a new problem, a new darkness and another need. And I'll walk them through it again, knowing that in the end I will not be invited into their times of joy. It hurts. It's just like when I healed those ten lepers and only one bothered to come back and thank me. These days it's not even one in ten.

But still, I want them to come anyway. Because I love them and it's a chance to be connected to them at least for that little part of their lives. So what if I'm being used? It may be the only chance I get to let them know I love them.

For Reflection

What is it about our lives that leads us to have a needs based relationship with God, i.e., only talking to God when we need help?

Can you think of common sayings that promote prayer as a last resort? Eg. "Well, all we can do now is pray."

God as therapist! Think of other images for God that work in some ways?

Read Exodus 20 v 1-17; Micah 6 v 8; Matthew 11 v 28 - 30; John 13 v 34 - 35.

Write up a job description for the people who are going to live as God's children.

Write up a job description for God.

What would be the worst part about being God?

What would the best part be?

Forever

I read about a woman who did a lovely thing for Jesus. His time was running out and he knew it. This woman anointed Jesus' head with oil – a beautiful, aromatic oil. It was a sign of her love for Jesus and of the enormous regard she had for him.

Trouble was, some people thought it was too much. The perfume was really expensive. It seemed like a waste to them, to use it on Jesus like that. They told her off. And so that they'd look all righteous about it, they made out that they were offended by the fact that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor.

Jesus knew what was really going on in their heads. He also knew what was going on in the heart of this caring and sincere woman. He loved what she had done. And those mean spirited critics were not going to get away with putting her down. So Jesus sticks up for her. He tells them it's a beautiful thing that she has done for him. He tells them that because of her act of love for him she will be remembered for all time.

And here it is 2000 years later and we know of her wonderful, sacrificial, expression of affection and gratitude. She has been immortalised – both on Earth and in Heaven. You know what that says to me? When Jesus sticks up for you, that's forever.

Zacchaeus knew that. Everyone hated him until the day Jesus invited himself around to Zac's for lunch. Zac changed his ways that very day. He knew Jesus was sticking up for him. He knew this was his big chance at a new life and he grabbed it with both hands. Jesus said that salvation had come to Zacchaeus that day. Salvation is for all eternity, and it starts with our lives in the right here and the right now. Zac held his head higher from that day on. When Jesus sticks up for you, it's forever.

Two guys on crosses, dying the same death as Jesus. One ridicules him. The other tells his fellow criminal to show some respect. They both deserve to die, but Jesus is innocent. Then he asks Jesus to stick up for him in the next life – and that's fine with Jesus, who gives him the assurance of Paradise – from that day onwards. When Jesus sticks up for you, it's forever.

Jesus, please stick up for me too.

For Reflection

Matthew 26 v 6 – 13: Mary.

Luke 19 v 1 – 10: Zacchaeus.

Luke 23 v 39 – 43: The two criminals.

My My!

My needs!

My rights!

My dreams!

My hopes!

My loved ones!

My things!

My money!

My success!

My world!

My God!

Why have you forsaken me?

For Reflection

How do you understand these verses from Matthew 10 v 38-39? “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow in my footsteps isn’t fit to be my disciple. Whoever tries to gain his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it.”

Another relevant passage to consider. Matthew 6 v 24-34

Do up an acrostic using the word “Selfishness”. Use this to lead into prayers of confession.

Love

I love everyone...everyone except Volvo drivers, taxi drivers, City Council bus drivers, learner drivers, woman drivers and a lot of men drivers for that matter.

I'll take the chance to lend a hand to anyone I come across... but the rich can pay me for it, the poor better appreciate it, the strong can owe me one and the weak can tell others what a great person I am.

I love everybody. It's just a coincidence that I don't have any Aboriginal friends. Nor do I hang out with any of those queue jumping boat people. In fact, I don't even know anyone of Asian descent. I don't even know any kind of immigrants for that matter. I love everybody, but, and I'm proud to say, none of my friends are gay.

I get on with pretty much everyone, but I can't stand people who talk too much. And how about those people who just look at you when you're talking to them and never try to get a word in? Doesn't that annoy you when you have to carry the whole conversation?

I love everybody, but I must admit, really good looking people make me self conscious, so I avoid them. And I don't like associating with ugly people either, because you find less people want to know you when you are around those ugly people. Sometimes I do them a big favour though and give them the time of day.

I like being around people who look pretty much like I do, and think like I do, and dress like I do, and smell like I do and do what I do. That's why I go to Church.

For Reflections

How do you react to that?

Who are you when you're not being your best self?

How comfortable are you with people outside of your class, race, culture, status?

How much do you mix outside of your immediate circle of friends and family? Why?

In As Much As...

“Scuse me, buddy, I ah, was ah, wondering if you could maybe help me out. I hate to ask but ah, I’m kinda stuck. I’m wondering if maybe you could lend me...
...your donkey to ride in to Jerusalem? (Matthew 21 v 1-3)

G’day. How you goin’? Yeah? That’s great. Boy things are really going well for you these days hey! And how’re the missus and the kids? Good, good. Look, as well as catching up with you, I’ve got a bit of a favour to ask of you. Works kind of getting on top of me, and I’m really worn out. I’m not coping real well, and to be honest I could really do with a hand. I’m wondering if you could help me with is this, I ah... I need some help to keep my arms outstretched, so we can win the battle against the Amelikites. (Exodus 17v11-12)

Oh well, I guess I am lonely. I get pretty sick of staring at these four walls. I can’t get out these days. And some of the old gang do come and visit which is great. I know you’re a very busy person with your work and your family to look after, but, well, you know, if you had some time free... maybe you could drop me a line, or bring around my favourite old coat, and have a bit of a visit with me here in jail. I’d love to hear what’s happening around all the churches I started up. (2 Timothy 4v9-13)

Then God said, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a suitable companion for him”. And God gave people to each other.

For Reflections

Where are you on the Independence – Interdependence scale?

Independence is highly valued in our society. Being self reliant is seen as an asset.

Is it really though? Does the Christian faith support it as an imperative? Why or why not?

Are you too independent to ask for help?

Are you the sort of person others can count on for help? Do they? Who needs you?

He Ain't Heavy

(This story is a narrated activity for use with a group – or several groups of about 7 or 8 people.)

My voice is the voice of Social Conscience – or lack thereof; the voice of, “Me first, others if I want to”.

You are who you are.

You don't have to do what I say but you can if you want to. As I speak, listen to your heart. See if my words make any difference to you. See if my words make any difference to how heavy your brother feels.

The voice of Social Conscience speaks.

“He ain't heavy. He's my brother. Better pick this guy up. He needs help.”

(Have the group physically pick up one of the group members and hold them up.)

“Not bad. I like this. It feels good to help someone. It feels good to be a part of a team that's helping others. I like these people. I like myself. I like this guy I'm carrying too. Don't I? Well, actually, I don't know him. I don't know him from a bar of soap actually!”

“He's not even from my country. He's from the other side of the world. Why do we have to carry him if he's from the other side of the world? Why doesn't someone over there do it? Surely he's their responsibility. There are millions of people over there – why are we carrying him instead of them doing it?”

“Because all those millions are in trouble too? They need carrying too?”

“Oh.”

“So what are we supposed to do, carry them all? That’s ridiculous. I can’t do that. I can’t carry all those people. This is getting to be a hopeless situation. It’s futile. The problem’s too big. I can’t do anything about it.”

“I’m carrying someone you say?”

“Yes, but that’s only one among millions. That’s not going to change the world.”

“This is stupid. Carrying one guy while millions of his friends lie around him hopeless and helpless. Why should this guy be the lucky one anyway? It’s a bit unfair really.”

“I don’t like this anymore. It’s too complicated. Hey look at him. This guy is black! Or is it yellow? No one told me he wasn’t the same colour as me. Actually, he smells too – he’s dirty. Why doesn’t he get his act together and shower like me? Why doesn’t he get a job and live like I do, look like I do and smell like I do?”

“He’s different. So are his million mates. Maybe we’re spoiling their culture, coming in here like this and carrying him. Maybe it’s cultural for them to be dirty, smelly, homeless and hungry. These people don’t even call God by his proper name. I think we should be forcing our world view of wealth, health and three meals a day and God on them.”

“Besides he’s getting heavy. I’m getting tired of this. I might just slip away. There are others here who are doing the job. They’re stronger than me. They want to do this more than I do. They won’t miss me. I’ve got better things to do than this. I might send these people a couple of bucks to help them keep up the good work though – if it’s tax deductible.”

“But then you’re never really sure the money will get to the ones who need it are you! I don’t want to be irresponsible with my money.”

“I’ll go away and think about it. Hey what’s this? Good movie on tonight.”

“I’ll think about it later.”

For Reflection

Activity: Separate into small groups of 7 or 8 people. Read the story aloud, and have the groups lift one member of the group up at the appropriate time and hold onto them until the last paragraph. (Be safety conscious with this, okay!)

Discussion questions:

What are the top ten excuses people give for not getting involved in supporting aid organizations?

What motivates those who do support aid groups?

Check out Matthew 25:31-46. What is Matthew saying about helping others?

How does helping others affect our relationship with God?

At The Table

The café was very full. There were no free tables, though some had spare seats. I was glad to have been able to get a table, a small one, in the semi-darkness and in a corner. A great place to hide. Perfect. Perfect except that there were two chairs, one for me and one to remind me that I was alone. It sat there, vacant, staring at me, accusing me.

My trial by vacant chair had just reached its verdict of “Guilty” when a stranger jarred me back into café land.

“Could I please share your table? There aren’t any others free” I held my hands up in surrender. There is no rest for the wicked. The vacant chair had not only found me guilty but now had also delivered its sentence. “Suffer the company of a stranger.”

He sat and smiled. I nodded and began to look for a paper to read, a briefcase to pull some work out of, a diary to get involved in, anything to shut him out. But there was no escape.

The stranger read my awkwardness, my annoyance and gave a gentle laugh. “Relax”, he said with a reassuring smile. “I’m having some wine, what would you like, a red or a white?”

“Red.” I said with no enthusiasm whatsoever, but beginning to accept my fate.

The waitress brought the bread rolls and menus. We both sat back in our chairs, read each others eyes for clues and weighed the silence. It was heavy but with thunder storms clearing. The stranger seemed harmless. His quietness was undemanding. His smile reassuring.

But just when I figured him to be safe, he asked, “Why are you alone here tonight?”, not aggressively, not accusingly, and surprisingly, not with a great deal of curiosity either.

“Because I have been a fool.” I told him honestly.

Now he looked quizzical. "A little foolishness can be a wonderful thing sometimes."

"No." I said. "I have been the worst kind of fool." I was hooked. He could reel me in now. I would have told him the whole story. I was ready to confess all. I had hurt people badly. I deserved the shame I now suffered with.

But he held up his hand to stop me. The waitress was by my side with the wine.

He thanked her and poured us both a drink. He lifted his glass in a toast and waited for me to salute. Which I did. We sipped. It was a powerful and excellent red that warmed you inside immediately.

"Can you repair the damage at all?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, maybe at least a little. I think I could at least try."

"Yes", he said reaching for a bread roll. "Then why haven't you done that?"

"Because I am so ashamed. I can't forgive myself so how can I ask them to?"

He broke a bread roll in half and handed me my portion. "Well I forgive you."

He said. "Why don't you go and give it your best shot?"

But it wasn't a question. And it wasn't a suggestion. It was like a benediction.

It didn't altogether make sense logically, but at some deeper level it made all the sense in the world. Maybe my soul heard something the mind couldn't yet grasp. I felt empowered. I felt a sense of hope. I knew what I must do. And even if it failed and those I'd hurt could not forgive me, and even if I could not forgive myself, there was at least one who did forgive me. And that was something. That was enough for a new start.

I smiled as I stood. I placed my hand on his shoulder as I thanked him and choked back the tears. "Thanks. Thank you so much." He stood and shook my hand. His eyes told me it was all going to be okay.

Those accepting, non-judgmental eyes told me that I was okay too.

No sooner had I taken a step on my way, when a young lady was there at the table asking the stranger if she might be able to share his table – the café was so crowded.

“Sure,” he said, “Would you like some bread and wine?”

For Reflection

The young lady and Jesus have a great time together. She gives him a kiss on the cheek and leaves. It's your turn at the table.

Meditate on what might happen there at the table with Jesus.

The New Driver

“Good night John”, I said to the bouncer as I brushed past him.

“Goodnight Renee”. He called after me, his eyes, I knew, watching me safely to the waiting taxi. It was only a little way to the alley where the taxis picked us girls up after our shift, but at 3 in the morning, after work like ours, I was glad to have my back watched till I was out of there.

I opened the door but stopped short of getting in. There was a new driver. “Where’s Jim?”

“He’s finished up. Graduated from Uni yesterday and doesn’t need this work anymore.”

He knew about Jim, and it was the same company taxi, so I figured he must be okay. I got in and slammed the door on any evil lurking on the street before it could get me.

He sensed the hurry, turned over the engine and was rolling forward as he asked, “Where to madam?”

I wasn’t putting up with that. This guy had to have the facts straight before he got any big ideas. “Listen wise guy, I’m no madam alright. The club pays me to dance and that’s what I do. And that’s all I do. You got that?”

“Sure. I’m sorry ma’am. No insult intended.”

And by the tone of his voice I knew that I’d taken him the wrong way completely. He was looking me in the eyes through the rear view mirror to show he was sincere. They were kind eyes and I felt sorry. Damn this job. It turns every man into a creep for me. Maybe this guy was okay. At least his mirror was adjusted for the road and not for peering up my skirt like Jim usually tried. Still, I wondered how long it would take before this one started tilting the mirror. If he tried it he’d get the well practised verbal slap in the face. “If you want to see more, pay your fee at the club and get the whole show, okay.”

He was driving, but kept glancing every few seconds at my eyes through the mirror like there was a problem. I was wondering what was up just as he asked again, "Where would you like to go?"

In my head, the question lingered long after I'd given him the address. Where would I like to go? That was a good question. I had several answers and they were all better than where I was at these days but none seemed feasible. I mulled it all over in the silence. There was plenty of time to think on these drives home and the silence was wonderful after the pounding music, the smoke, the smell of spilt beer and the leering cheers of the men who wanted more and more no matter how far you went.

The drive home was peaceful. I let my thoughts do their usual few laps around in circles for awhile. Where did I want to go? Same as usual. I wanted out but I didn't know where to. Or maybe it was that I knew where to, but not how to get there.

The driver was quiet. Just doing his job. Which was unusual. Most taxi men got all excited at the idea of driving a show-girl home. They'd brag about it to their mates first chance they got and lie about what went on. So usually they'd want to talk and flirt around a little or play the big tough guy and tell you some heroic story about what a big man they were and how they handled these three drunk guys on the last ride.

But this guy didn't want anything from me. I watched him in the mirror. He caught me staring at him and just smiled ever so naturally at me. I smiled back at him. He drove on.

I went back to my laps but the frustration of that destroyed the peace of the clean night air and the deserted suburban streets we were now moving into.

So I did something I don't normally do. I started to chat with the new driver. I asked him about his life, about his work, his interests. With each answer he gave, I liked him more and more. It was his manner more than anything. You know, kind of unassuming, natural, sincere... sweet. Yeah, that's how I would describe him. The new driver was a sweetie. He didn't mind answering my questions, but he wanted to give me my share of the air space too, so he'd ask me some stuff, some safe stuff that he knew wouldn't be

too personal. It was nice. With no strings attached and no hidden agendas. It was really nice.

I thought back to my night's work and compared it to this easy-going time and shook my head and laughed.

"What?" he asked.

"I bet you've never seen my show. I bet you've never even been inside one of those kind of places have you?" His smile told me I was right.

I was going to say, "What's the matter don't you like girls?" but this guy didn't need that. I thought about saying, "Too good for the rest of us are you?" but we were way past that. We liked each other. In fact he treated me like a lady. With respect and, well, like a person who could become his friend. Like I wasn't an exotic dancer.

What I did say surprised me. "What do you think of me?"

"I think you're great. It's been really nice talking to you." He said looking me in the eyes again through the mirror smiling. I took a mental note that he hadn't adjusted the mirror at all.

"No, I mean for being a dancer".

"Well what do you think of yourself?"

"I think I'm just absolutely fantastic. I'm brilliant. I'm earning incredible money. I have all this power over men. I drive them crazy and they all want me. It's an incredible trip having all these men lusting after what they can't have. And the money! Did I mention the money? I think that I'm one smart little cookie."

"No you don't," he said in the same easy-going way that we'd been talking in all night. I looked out the window. We were both quiet again. For a long time.

We drove past a church I went to as a kid. Those were the good times really. It was all pretty simple back then. God loved me when I was a kid. All the church people told me that. I bet He'd changed his mind about me now.

"I used to go to that church when I was a kid." I told him as much thinking out loud as to change the subject.

"You're joking!" he said all excited. "That's a church I go to. I've been going there for ages myself now."

I asked about different people I remembered who used to teach me Sunday School or just took a kindly interest in me. Some of them were still there. A lot of good people at my old church. And one of my all time favourites was still going, still teaching Sunday School to the kids.

"I'd love to go back and say Hi to some of those people, you know. They were great people. We had some excellent camps and stuff with that church."

"Yeah you could do that. Your old teacher would get a real buzz out of that."

I was thinking I would, I really would. Except that she would ask me, "What are you doing with yourself these days?" and what am I going to tell her, "Oh well, I'm one of the top strippers in town now." I don't think so. So I'd have to lie. And you know I wouldn't like myself for lying to her. For having to lie to her.

"No. No. I don't think so. But hey..."

And then I realised I didn't know his name. "I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Josh, what's yours?" and with that he reached his left hand over his shoulder. I leaned forward and gave it a squeeze and a shake. "Mary", I told him. My real name. I'd broken a taboo. My real name. I tensed up but then I let it go. I felt safe with him.

"Josh, would you say 'Hi.' for me? Would you tell them I think about them fondly?"

"Umm I don't know. Why don't you come with me and tell them 'Hi.' yourself? Tell them you're in between jobs at the moment, if that's what you're worried about".

"But I don't want to lie to them".

"So, tell them that, but make it the truth".

He read my mind as I did the maths of normal job pay cheque versus exotic dancer pay cheque and he added, "You're not going to let the money thing stop you are you?"

We thrashed a lot of things out then. We talked about whether or not God still loved me. Josh said he did. We talked about a person like me setting foot inside the church, and then he told me a thing or two about what really goes on in church people's lives and how we're all sinners anyway, in one way or another. Ain't that the truth. I've recognised some faces from my old church days in the audience when I perform. I've thanked God, literally that they didn't recognise me now that I'm all grown up. We thrashed around a lot of stuff but I felt like we were only beginning to get somewhere when he asked again, "Where would you like to go?" We arrived at the address I had given. The address I normally give, then when the taxi is out of sight I walk the extra blocks to my real address.

"We're almost there. Two lefts and then a right." I was going to let Josh take me to my real home.

"So, you reckon I should give up my job, take a cut in salary, a big one, then start coming to church? Next you'll be asking me to teach Sunday School myself."

"Sure. As a matter of fact I think you'd be excellent working with young people."

I shook my head in disbelief. But, you know, that all had a nice feeling to it. I'd have liked for that to be possible. But this was one little taxi ride with a stranger. You can't change your life around on the strength of something like that, can you? It was all a long way from my world, a whole galaxy away.

"Tell you what, you come to my club sometime, see what my world is really like, catch my show, then tell me I'm still welcome at church. You come and watch me perform and then you'll know why I can't come to your church. You don't know what it's like. A person can't go from there into a church, the roof would cave in, or God would strike the place with lightning."

"That's not true and you know it", Josh pulled the cab over in front of my place. We'd arrived at where I lived. But it didn't feel like I was home. Where did I want to be instead? There was a silence and a recognition that this is where I had to get out. I thanked him. Told him it was nice meeting him, paid the fee and got out. He said, "Goodnight Mary. Don't forget to say your prayers." waved and then drove off.

It's funny but that's just what my dad used to say when I was a little girl as he was tucking me into bed at night. Then he'd give me a big kiss and turn off the light. And I would chat happily away to a heavenly Father who loved me, who listened to all my stories and was right there with me in the darkness so that I wasn't too afraid. I'd fall asleep in the arms of a God who loved me very much.

That night I did remember to say my prayers again. God and I did a lot of catching up. At the end I curled up once more in the arms of a God who still loved me very much, just like when I was a little girl. And as I fell asleep it felt so good, so very, very good to be there.

For Reflection

What feelings does the woman stir up in you? The driver? How comfortable would you be driving home a stripper? How welcome would an exotic dancer be at your church? At your home for a meal with the family?

About the driver's approach with her, in what ways was he getting it right?

In what ways could he have been more helpful?

If Jesus were in the same situation, what do you think he would do and why do you think that?

Mary said that he should go to her club to know what her world is really like. Should he? Have you ever been asked by a friend to do something that you know was wrong but felt like you should do it for the sake of your relationship with them? Would you be willing to tell each other about it and whether you regretted whatever course of action you took?

Jesus and the sinners:

Luke 2 v 13-17

John 8 v 1-11

Luke 7 v 36-50

Luke 15 v 1-7

Luke 15 v 11-32

Matthew 18 v 12-13

Matthew 21 v 28-32

Matthew 22 v 1-14

Jesus advice about sinners:

Matthew 7 v 1-5 Matthew 18 v 21-35 Luke 6 v 37-42 Luke 18 v 9-14

How would each of the following passages apply for the woman do you think?

The two house builders: Matthew 7 v 24-26

You can't serve both God and money: Matthew 6 v 24-33; Matthew 19 v 16-23;

Luke 12 v 13-34

Come to me and find rest: Matthew 11 v 28-30

Temptations: Matthew 18 v 6-9

What other passages would you like to recommend to her and why?

The Smile Of God

It's Communion at church today.

This cup is the blood of Christ, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

This bread, his body, broken for you...

The blood, the rough cross, the nails, the beatings. Jesus whipped, bashed, spat upon, mocked and scorned. The sinless Christ bashed up, cast down, pushed aside and thrown up- nailed naked to the cross, the spear shoved in his side to make absolutely sure we were rid of him.

I gaze into the cup and remember it all. Why Lord? Why would you go through this humiliation, this agony, for such as the likes of me?

Sunlight shone through the stain glass window. The light caught the Communion table and was reflected in the wine. It bent with the curve of the cup, bent into the shape of a smile. There it was. The answer.

The smile of God in the Communion cup.

The smile of God.

For Reflection

What does communion mean for you?

Have there ever been any extra special moments at the Lord's table for you?

Go to the gospels and read each of the stories of Jesus instituting Communion.

Matthew 26 v 26 – 30; Mark 14 v 22 – 26; Luke 22 v 14 – 20.

Confession Skit

A person (*P*) is sitting at a table with their head bowed in an attitude of solemn prayer

P - "Dear God, I'm sorry for all the sins I have committed as I.."

God - *interrupting as he joins the person at the table* - "Hey, what's up?"

P - "Oh, Hi God, I was just starting to have a chat with you."

God - "Oh, Cool. Go ahead."

P - "Ah,, where was I up to?"

G - "I think you were starting in with some confession."

P - "Yeah, that's right. Anyway God I was saying that I'm sorry for all the sins I commit as I go about my daily living."

G - "Oh yeah, like what?"

P - *A bit taken surprised* - "Well I'm sorry for how I said "No" to taking on that new job at church that I was asked to do."

G - "Hey, that's okay. I didn't want you to do that anyway. I'd much rather that you concentrate on the two ministries you are already helping me with. You are doing a great job with those. Besides, I kind of reckon Bill would be good for that other job and I'm working on him to consider it."

P - *relieved* - "Oh, okay. Well, that's good. So I don't need to feel bad about that?"

G - *enthusiastically* - "Nah, you are doing such a great job with that children's group - that's where I want you to stay for now.. You really love the kids and you're trying to let them know how much I love them - I really appreciate what you are doing there.

Good on you.

And coordinating the early adult activities too – that’s great. Usually the young adults at your church are all busy serving me but I want someone to look out for their needs to. So will you keep doing that for me too?”

P – “Sure God. No worries.”

G – “Okay, so what else have you got?”

P – “Huh?”

G – “Sins – Got any juicy ones you want to get off your mind?”

P – “Well I’m sorry for going off at Shazza the other day. It really wasn’t very fair..”

G – *interrupting* – “Nah, you’ve told me about that one already. I forgave that last Friday. What else you got?”

P – “Oh. Umm. Well I’m sorry for not being more active in my prayer life, for neglecting you God.”

G – “Yes. I miss our chats. I don’t like it when we don’t connect for ages. But you know, you say this every time you confess your prayers. Don’t keep apologising – just fix it alright? Talk to me. I’m always here.

So try another one on me.”

P – “Well I know you know that I ignored Jill at Church the other...”

G – *interrupting* – “Forgiven last Sunday night. New material only please.”

P – “There was the fact that I gave the ups to that maniac driver on ..”

G – *interrupting* – “Done. Forgiven on Thursday. You know you don’t have to ask me twice. I heard you the first time. And I’m very good in the forgiving business. Trust me alright. If you’ve told me you’re sorry, you mean it and you’re going to try not to do it again, then you’re clear.

So come, on give me some good new goss about your sins.”

P – “Well I um, ..ahh..”

G- "How about we get in to your thought life if you're stuck for ideas. About that hot babe at the shops for example."

P- "Oh yes, I know what you mean. God you sure did a good job on that one. You make it hard for us to keep a clean thought life God."

G- "Hey, there's appreciation and then there's lust. Just go with appreciation okay."

P- "God, I'm such a lousy Christian. I wonder some times if I should just give up. I'm a disgrace to the faith. If people think I'm a Christian and see where I go wrong so often, they would never want to become Christians themselves."

G- *obviously sarcastic* - "Yeah, I know what you mean. You're bad alright. Like how you always welcome new people who come to church and make them feel welcome. Like how you are leading those kids in your group to me. Like how you started a Bible Study group for the young adults. Like how you stood up for that person who was getting paid out on at work. Like how you always keep in touch with your friends and give them special attention if you know they need you. Like how you really respect your elders and have a teachable spirit willing to learn from people further along in the faith than you. Like how you always try to be at worship on Sunday night and think of it as our special date.

So, yeah, I can see why you are down on yourself."

P- "You're being sarcastic right?"

G- "Right."

P- "I'm confessing my sins and you're giving me a pat on the back?"

G- "Yeah, it seems that today it's the only way to stop you dragging up all that boring old stuff I've already forgiven. Besides, I think confession is a good time to remind you how much I love you. We both know you aren't perfect. That's why you need me as your saviour. And I am your saviour. So don't get too uptight about your sins. I've got them covered okay? Keep confessing- owning up when you blow it - that's important. And I'll keep forgiving. Trust me on that.

Don't ever think that you're going to give up being a Christian because you keep sinning. Being sinful means you need me. You're a Christian because you've put your life in my hands, not because you are perfect and never do anything wrong.

Anyway, I'm lecturing. Let's move off confession and move on to thanksgiving now, cause I'm excited to find out if you recognised all the ways I blessed you today I sent some really cool things your way. Did you recognise the beautiful sunset?... "

God - And so I say to you that your sins have been forgiven

Us - Thanks be to God

For Reflection

Shot Puts

Heavy little things.
You have to try to get as far as
You can with them.
It takes strength to handle them.
And the more you handle them
The stronger you get.
God's truths are a lot like
Shot puts.

For Reflection

What are some of God's truths you've had revealed to you which you would definitely put in the shot put category? How did they affect you? Are you any different as a result of them?

On The Surface

Walls of water, parallel play.

Like surfers sitting astride their boards, floating on the surface, of a deep and mysterious ocean. Waiting for the next wave of conversation to come through.

A swell moves up from out of the blue. The set comes in, walls of water. We take turns catching the waves. Words skimming over the face of the deep. Up and down we go, slashing and turning, words spraying, sliding, skipping all over the face of it, fast and furious, using our words so skilfully.

It's a surface dance and we are only vaguely aware, that we are performing at least for ourselves, if not for each other. When we sense the conversation closing out, we cut off and paddle out the back, pushing through the difficult white noise, struggling to get back to where another conversation might roll in. We sit and wait, catching our breath, averting our eyes in the silence, waiting for that next wave to flow along.

Sometimes as we ride the waves and do our tricks on the surface, we dig in too hard, the words shudder and go ugly, the wave turns on us. We wipe out, the wave crashing over us, pushing us down, down below the surface, where we are afraid, so afraid.

Holding back the rising sense of panic, we scramble madly for fresh air, safety and the surface, again.

Usually it's fun though.

But, do we always have to stay at the surface level? I mean, always?

Aren't you curious about what we might find if we go deeper with each other?

Look over the side, down there. Even from the surface, peering from this relative safety, when the waters are clear enough, you can see that things are going on down deeper. There are shadows and movements, shapes and living things – some scary things, yes, but some beautiful things too maybe.

One day, let's leave the boards behind and grab some snorkels instead.
How about you and I go deeper with each other?

Let's go out to the reef for some excitement and some new adventures. What if we risked that? We could take a deep breath and stuff our lungs with oxygen and go for it. We could find out what's down there beneath the surface in each other. Let's explore the action at that level, and discover the colours, the currents, and the creatures lurking around down there.

Let's discover the wild, the wonderful, the wilful, the playful and the hungry, the ugly and the beautiful, in the soul beneath the surface. And when we feel like we can't bear it anymore, we'll scramble madly upwards, to catch our breath and rest.

Until we are ready to go deeper again. How about it? Are you in for that?
We can still go surfing, of course we can. I love it as much as you. But let's go snorkelling too sometimes, okay?

For Reflection

What did the story bring to mind for you?

Define "snorkelling" conversations and "surfing" conversations.

What are the risks associated with each level of conversation?

What does it take before you are willing to be open and vulnerable by expressing your true self to another?

How do you move beyond a surface level conversation with someone?

Check out these "Sinkers" and see if any could work to help you get to really know someone.

"Tell me about yourself, I'd like to get to know you better."

"...yes, and how do you feel about that?"

"What do you really think about that?"

"Can I tell you something personal about myself?"

If you are working with a group, each share how you'd rate the depth level of the group, and whether or not you'd be comfortable going deeper. Then discuss what topics of conversation you would like to have the group get in to. Check out Proverbs 18 together and discuss it.

Consider Jesus conversations with Mary & Martha in Luke 10 v 38 – 42; the woman at the well in John 4 v 1 – 41; and with Nicodemus in John 3 v 1 – 21.

How about you and God, how deep do your prayers take you with God? God might already know everything about you, but do you ever sit down together over a cuppa and spill your guts to him? Do you ever just have fun with God in prayer and kind of hang out together and muck around casually?

There are great benefits for your relationship with God in having a healthy blend of all kinds of conversations with God. Experiment with prayer. God might just enjoy the new prayers as much as you do.

Now Then Ahead

When I grow up... One Day I'm going to... If I pass this course then... Things will be better tomorrow... When I win the Lotto...

I don't pay too much attention to the Future. I'm not even sure I believe in it. It may or may not be there.

I plan for it though. And I hope in it. But when I reach for it, I can never grab it. Because as soon as you think you've caught hold of it, it instantly becomes the Now, and before you know it, it turns into the Then.

Wondering about the Future is like chasing a lizard. When you finally catch it by the tail, it promptly sheds it, while the lizard itself runs off out of reach again. You're left holding this wriggling bit of something or other, asking yourself, "Is that all I get?" No, I don't believe too strongly in the Future.

The Future is like a dream, part menacing nightmare and part sweet premonition, with neither being yet true.

She can be a temptress. A beautiful siren, singing at the shore, promising all things wonderful, calling you to hurry to her. Ah, but this sailor's rushed things before, and ended up on the rocks. I won't be falling for that trick again. When the Future plays up to me, calling sweetly, flirting wildly, I'll call back that I'm on my way. But I will not be distracted from trimming the sails, steering the course around the rocks, keeping to the deeper waters – doing all the tasks that must be focused on Now.

The Future beckons, but I'm holding hands with the Now. And I will be faithful to her, as my wife, and we will take our own sweet time travelling towards a Future together. When we arrive at the dock, it will be the Now that is with me, all the more beautiful for having been loved and cherished all along the journey. And that siren, the Future, will she be there at the docks to greet me on my arrival? Of course not. She will have

moved ahead and be calling me on to the next destination, keeping me on an eternal chase. The Future cannot be here for me, with me. Only Now can do that.

So, the Future is a temptress from some spirit world that we can only long for, but she can't be held. Only Now can be embraced. Now is real. Now is happening. And what of the Past?

The Past is a ghost you can't cling to.
I remember the good old days...When I was younger I used to...In the past I was...I used to be really good at...In my glory days...Things were different back then...

I don't believe too much in the Past. It might have happened, but it may or may not affect me now. I am glad for having been in it – well, some of it anyway. And I remember it, good and bad, some of it clearly even. I hope I have learnt from it.

The Past, in many ways, has been a mother to both the Now and to the Future. But I will not let her mother me. After all, the Past has turned her back on me and left me. The Past has walked away from me and the distance between us grows each day. That distance is irretrievable. There is no going back.

The Past was once that bit of the future that I'd grabbed, only to find that it broke off in my hands, thrashed around for a while and became what it now is. No. I don't believe too strongly in the Past.
Now is real. Now is happening.

My heart and my mind are like two naive little children. They often ask to go and visit with the Future. But I can only allow them short visits. They'd live there if I let them. That would be far too cruel for their soul. They'd neglect their Now, and find by doing so, the Future they wanted to visit, never became the reality they wanted to live. To live with the Future is a trick. The symbiosis of Now demands that its hosts be present. If they are not, Now dies and the absent hosts are left scanning a life they never lived like some catatonic dreamers.

My heart and mind are allowed to remember the Past. They can visit her as well, but only if the Past promises not to play too roughly with them. As long as every one plays nicely together, it will be okay, to visit the Past. As long as no one gets too stirred up about things.

As long as the grace of God is shining on those visits, they will be very pleasant. Best to plan gentle visits with the past, if we must go there at all. To kind of sit by the river bank with her in the afternoon, a cool drink in hand, listening to the ice cubes clink; having a quiet chuckle together about all the things that have happened. That's the way to visit the Past.

But I'll call the kids home before too long. Best not to overstay your welcome. The Past can get moody. It can get clingy too. The Past has demons that must be wrestled with sooner or later, but the kids must be grown up and mature before they can take to those games and win. So make the visits short and sweet. Say your good byes, promise to come again sometime, peel away from her clinging embrace, then head on home quickly to hug the Now. She's been missing you.

The heart and mind must live with the Now. That's where the soul needs them to be. They must make the most of it, before it has gone. Now is all we really have in the World. Now responds to our every touch, to our every move and action. It hums when we sing to it. It reverberates when we bang it. It glows when we warm to it. It hurts when we hate it. It bleeds when we stab it. It heals when we tend to it. It blossoms when we water it. It lives when we live it, when we truly live it.

Now is alive, a living gift from God. The Past's gifts were great. And the Future may hold more good gifts in waiting for us. But it's Now that God has given us to make the most of. Unwrap it, Now. Enjoy it, Now. Live it, Now.

For Reflection

How much time do you spend thinking about the past?

Are your memories enjoyable or painful?

Are you aware of some “demons” from your past that need to be wrestled with? If so, how could that best be done, eg. In prayer, with some good friends, by making amends for what you’ve done, by getting some professional counselling,..?

As an exercise in prayer, take a walk down memory lane with God. Spend time remembering things from each year of your life, or from selected years and talk with God about your memories. Prayers of confession, praise, thanksgiving may all have a place here, along with prayers for others and simply chatting with God.

How much time do you spend living in the future? Too much, enough, not enough?

Why is that?

What are the risks involved in never thinking about your future?

What are the risks involved in always thinking about your future?

Take God with you in to a Future projection, seeking his guidance and blessing, for you and for the people who may be in your life then.

Bible Readings to meditate on. Psalm 71. Ecclesiastes 3 v 1 – 15. Matthew 28 v 20.

Why?

Clench your fist and shake it in the face of the heavens. Take a full deep breath and then scream it into the cold, heartless sky.

Why? Why?

Sit slumped over with your head in your hands and whisper it, over and over again like a chant. Why? Why? Why?

Gasps it between your sobs.

Why?

The infuriating silence is God's only reply. "Why?" we ask.

And God tells us.... Nothing.

Nothing.

Silence.

I've listened to that silence, that maddening silence. I've listened to it. And writhed in it and hated it and rejected it and spat on it and kicked it in.

But this time, after a long, long, a very long time, I think I began to understand it.

Why?

Could it be that the silence, the nothingness, is itself God's answer? There is no answer because there is no reason why. There is no reason. There is no reason. It was not God's will. This was not meant to be. It was not part of a plan. It just... happened.

And God is silent, not out of cruelty, or spite, or incompetence. God is silent like any other good listener would be. He listens to our pain.

And yes, I do believe he understands it. Personally. From the heart.

After all, his own dear son was brutally murdered was he not? We live in a broken world. Bad things happen. To everyone. And God weeps with those who weep.

For Reflection

Look at the murders of the babies in Jerusalem, when Herod was after the baby Jesus, Matthew 2 v 13 – 18. The man born blind, John 9. The book of Job. The crying Psalms; 13; 22; 38; 69; etc. Romans 8 v 31 – 39. 2 Corinthians 1 v 3 – 11. Romans 5 v 3 – 5. Philippians 1 v 20 – 26. Luke 13 v 1 – 5.

In the light of these passages, is predestination a reliable Christian theology or not? Does God make everything happen, allow things to happen, know they will happen, be there for us if they happen, or what? How much of what goes on is God's work, Satan's work, the result of our own free will and the choices we or others have made, and how much is purely random?

Consider the suffering of Christ. Isaiah 52 v 13 – 53 v 12.

What truths do you hold on to in suffering? Do they work, ie; do they make sense, do they comfort, do they bring any sense of honest hope in the crisis? If not, why don't you ditch them?

What theories or common words of supposed comfort, have you heard people offer others, that you think are actually really hurtful, wrong, naive or dishonest?

Water In To Wine

Mourning into dancing.

Water into wine.

Laughter.

When despair comes to visit, Laughter leaps into its arms like a jester, embracing it, dancing it wildly all around the room until it surrenders its power and even despair bursts into laughter too.

So don't give me advice. Don't counsel me please. Don't take me too seriously. Tonight in this semi-darkness, just bring the light of laughter and share it with me.

Come visit me with a bottle of God's wonder wine. Let's shake it up till it goes berserk. Pop the cork. Together let's watch Old Giggles do its healing thing. We'll slap our laps and roll around and lose control, then laugh and snort and roll around some more.

Laughter. Let's start it up with a simple smile tossed between one another. Aglint, a twinkle in the meeting of the happy eyes. A gentle fizzing in the souls at first. Then fizzing more and more, fizzing up into bubbles. Bubbles flying up, bursting into laughter. Bursting, exploding like sparks from a sparkler, shooting out everywhere. Sparking outwards, catching fire within everyone they touch. Fire that warms, cheers and makes you feel well all over, within and without. Fire that, even as it settles, leaves coals still glowing in your soul. Coals to carry around with you to warm your heart. Coals like mischievous little angels at bedtime. You think they are settling down, but who really knows? At the slightest hint of time's life-giving breeze, the coals of laughter throw off the bedtime blankets, leap up into flames again, shouting out,
"Who's ready to play?"
"Who's ready to play?"

Me! Me! I'm ready to play! Come on, Giggles, tackle me, tickle me. Give it your best shot. I'm ready and waiting.

For Reflection

Remember some of the funny things that have happened to you and enjoy the memories. Who are the funniest people you know – or the people that are the most fun to be around? Do yourself a favour and go spend some time with them.

Plan a laughter party with a group of people you enjoy. Everyone who comes must bring at least three of these to share – a favourite joke; favourite party game; silly trick; funniest video clip, funniest excerpt from a movie; crazy party food; something that's funny.

At the end of the party read the story. Thank God for the gifts of laughter, and for each other.

Being able to see the funny side of the things that happen in life is a fantastic gift. It can turn everything around. How might a person develop that ability?

Palm Sunday ~ Good Friday

I was just wondering. Where was the Palm Sunday crowd when the “crucify” crowd were doing their thing?

Palm Sunday.

Lord Jesus, I give my life to you now. Thank you for forgiving me for all my sins. Thank you for saving me. I claim you as my Lord and I want to love my life for you for the rest of my days. Please fill me with the Holy Spirit and help me to live my life the way you want me to.

Amen.....

Good Friday.

Jesus? Oh yeah, I used to have a scene with him. I did all that church trip. Youth group. Camps. You know, all that. Jesus and I were pretty good mates for awhile there. But...well...you know how it is?

What with all the study I had to do – and my job. And my girlfriend/boyfriend wasn't really too keen on me being religious. And then there was the pub and the nightclubs and the parties and the sex.

You know Jesus just didn't fit in anymore really. You know how it is?

That was all a long time ago now. I've settled down a lot. I remember my Jesus stage every now and then but what with my career, the mortgage, the kids, professional development, leisure activities, financial investments to look after and my work with Lions, who's got time for religion anymore?

You know how it is.

Crucify him?
I didn't say that.

No I didn't.

I did not.

I...

I...

Palm Sunday. Good Friday.

For Reflection

Why did God need to send Jesus?

How are you presently living your life? As a "Palm Sunday", person or as a, "Crucify him!" person?

Read John 12 v 12-19, then read John 19 v 1-16

What does "Palm Sunday - Good Friday" say to you?

Is there a message in it that you take as a personal danger/warning signal?

In what ways does the parable of the sower (Mark 4) relate to this?

Still Working For God

My boss drives me crazy. I'm sure he's got this complex. You see, he thinks he's God. I was almost going to say "Not literally of course", but when I think about it – yes – literally. He really thinks that he is God.

Now don't get me wrong. He doesn't order me or any of his other employees around or treat us like dirt. He doesn't insult us, abuse his authority over us or anything like that – which so many other bosses have done.

The problem is entirely a matter of how he regards himself. You can just tell that he thinks he's on a different plane to everyone else. He won't join in with the staff if there are dirty jokes going around. He gets this look of disapproval on his face if he catches us talking enthusiastically about women we've known in the past. He looks disappointed when we compete for power. The list goes on and on. He's got a million little ways of letting you know he's different from everyone else.

The only person I've ever heard him talk about as if he were equal to himself is another really top boss – which is a bit vain if you ask me.

I'm getting fed up. No one says to me, "Good morning J.I." when I come in to work and no one's likely to even consider me as a candidate for the position of boss as long as this guy who thinks he's God-come-to-earth is around.

Some powerful "execs" from the Jewish community are looking for a way to get him off the scene too. He's ruining their business – decrying their practices publicly, stealing their customers and making a general display of his take-over bid.

They want him out of business – and soon. Actually they've sought my professional counsel on the matter. For thirty bits of silver they've got it.

I think I've made the right move. What do you think?

J.I.

(Judas Iscariot)

For Reflection

What was it in people that made them hate Jesus enough to kill him? Whatever it was – we've got it too. The same attitudes that killed Jesus can lurk in us. Intolerance. Non-acceptance. Demanding that people think, believe and act as we want them to. Jealousy. Resenting people's good abilities and personalities because they make us look bad.

Attitudes – if we give in to them – lead to actions. Good attitudes produce good actions, and bad attitudes bad actions. Bad attitudes towards people lead us to backstab, to rubbish, to resent, to exclude, to ignore, to belittle, to refuse to co-operate with or help the people we can't accept and love.

Bad attitudes are the nails we use to crucify people with in a hundred subtle ways. And look! There! There in your thoughts and emotions! What's that in your heart? Is that a bagful of nails? Are you going to go around crucifying people with those?

Get them out! Get rid of them! And kick out any new ones that come along too. Those nails are as hot as hell and they'll shrivel your soul if you leave them there. Of all people, Jesus followers especially should have nothing to do with those damned nails.

Jeremiah 17 v. 9-10: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."

John 1 v. 9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Psalms 51 excerpts: "Be merciful to me O God, because of your constant love. Because of your great mercy wipe away my sins! Wash away all my evil and make me clean from my sin! I recognise my faults.... Create a pure heart in me, O God, and put a new and loyal spirit in me. Do not banish me from your presence; do not take

your Holy Spirit away from me. Give me again the joy that comes from your salvation and make me willing to obey you.”

Ephesians 4 v. 1-2: “I urge you then.....live a life that measures up to the standard God set when he called you. Be always humble, gentle and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another.

Hoping For An Echo ~ Valentine's Day

Ring Ring. Ring Ring. Ring Ring.

Knock knock. Knock knock. Knock knock.

If I came to your door with flowers and chocolate and said, "I love you", would that do the trick?

If I came bearing gifts I'd made especially for you, fashioned with my own hands... If I flung a myriad of twinkling stars throughout the darkness of the night sky to show you the light of my love... If I splashed my love around your world in waterfalls, waves, rivers and rain..... If I painted you a world with all the colours of the rainbow, the beauty of the flowers and the blazing power of the sunrise and said, "This is all for you. I love you", would that be enough? Would you see that I do love you?

If I wrote you letters and poems and songs and stories... If I put them all in a book and dedicated it to you with all my love, would that move you? Would you believe me when I told you that I love you?

If I sent you singers, poets and prophets, messengers, martyrs and saints to deliver the message of my love, would they get through to you? Would you listen and would your spirit be sparked to life? Would your soul rise up on wings like eagles to ride upon the thermals of my love?

If I sent my love to you in human packages, wrapped up in the skin of your family or your friends, would you catch on? Would you catch on that their love was also my love? Would you see those people who love you as a dowry from me to you?

And when your own heart is at its best, when it swells up and overflows with compassion, affection, caring and kindness, would you know that I was at the source? Would you know my love within the love you feel or give to others? Do you know that

you love others because I first loved you ... and that they love you because I wanted them to.

If I became like you and felt your pain and cried your tears and wore your frustrations; battled with the same desires and temptations that you struggle with; if I shared your joys and bore your sorrows all just to say "I understand, I know, I love you.", would you respond? Would you love me back?

If I flung myself before the crushing judgment and wrath that was aimed at you and shielded you from certain death; if I died your death, took the punishment in your place; if I sacrificed my very self to win you a new lease on an everlasting life, would that be proof enough for you to know? To know that I love you?

And if I rose from the dead and by my spirit I chiselled and chipped, chiselled and chipped day in, day out, week after week, year after year, until eventually I broke through the steel vault of your hardened heart, just to whisper in that vacant space the words, "I love you", would you hear an echo?

Would there be a faint reply?

A meek response... from you

That said,
that you love me too?

Yes. YES. Yes, Lord.

There would be an echo. I Love You.

I do love you. And how will I show you my love?

By the words of my mouth, in my prayers and my praise. By the deeds that I do in living my life. I will strive to give others my love, your love, as if giving it directly to you. By my efforts and with your help I will seek to surrender my will to your ways, to feel as

you feel, to care as you care, and to love you with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength.

Yes, lover of my soul, my friend, my saviour, my Lord and my God, the echo you hope for is there.

For Reflection

Make, write, draw, or pray your response to God.

A Prayer For Church Leaders

Jesus, your bride, the church, is far from perfect and it's not always easy to serve it. This prayer is for our church leaders who must teach, tolerate, pastor, perfect and love us. God bless them.

Lord, when the church behaves childishly – as we do at times – when we stamp our feet, demand our own way; when we sulk and pout and manipulate; when we'd rather live in fantasy-land than face the harsh realities of life; when we'd rather be playing happily in our own little sandpit, blissfully ignorant to the struggles, hurts and fears within our society.

At these childish, brattish moments of the church, please give our leaders the Spirit of our Heavenly Father, that through them you may bring to us your strength, your patience, your wisdom, direction and correction, and yes, that through them you may apply the hand of loving discipline to the church's seat of learning.

And please God may the church be humble about being child-like and to move beyond all that is wrong in being childish.

And when the church is being as unmanageable as a teenager at its worst, being egocentric, grabbing popularity and acceptance from the world so much that it becomes easily led by the wrong influences, pandering to its own lusts – lust for power, for property, for status, recognition, a sense of being all-important, always enjoying the luxury of preparing to do and to be, putting off actually doing and being, when the church tries on different roles and experiments with a variety of self-chosen identities – ignorant to its one high calling and purpose in you God...at these testing, trying teenage times of the church, Lord, give the church mentors. Give us leaders we can look up to, wiser friends to get alongside us and steer us on to a straighter course.

Give our leaders the Spirit of Christ. Help them to be as a friend, a big brother. Help them, in love, to encourage growth, to facilitate action, to model self-control, to show the church what it is meant to be. And in this mentoring role to the teenage

church, may they spark up its capacity for idealism, high hopes, dreams and visions, enthusiasm, zeal and energy.

In the church's adult times, when it's working hard, keeping busy, having its meetings, taking its mission seriously, striving to do the work of God in a wicked world, may our leaders, in the comforting of your Holy Spirit, remind us of the simple truths, that apart from you we cannot bear fruit; that unless the Lord builds, the builders toil in vain. May they remind us that rest, play and fun are gifts of God to be embraced too, that adults need the faith of children to see the Kingdom of God, that what you require of us God, is that we love you and that we love others.

Bless us and use your servants within the churches they serve. Open our hearts, minds, and souls to receive what you seek to give us through them.

Amen.

For Reflection

In what ways have you seen us (the church) act childishly, or like a teenager at their worst, or like an adult?

What do you think church leaders need most in dealing with the church?

Write your own prayer for all church leaders.

Your Minister's Farewell, Retirement Speech

And, in conclusion, I would like to dedicate my ulcer to the church that refused to be the church; to the people who called themselves the people of God, but did not live as if they were; to the tasteless salt; those under the banner of love who gave me none.

I dedicate my heart attack to those in the church who worked a 35 hour week, got a 'rec' day every fortnight and had every single weekend off but who expected me to work six days a week, twelve hours a day and then either intruded upon, stole or resented my one day a week off.

I dedicate this third rate outer suburban retirement house to the rich people in the church who owned their own beautiful homes by the age of forty; who spent their weekends at their holiday homes at the coast and sat on church boards that happily saw to it that I should be paid half what they were.

I dedicate my retirement frustration and boredom to the church that dictated that my life should be full of my work for them, leaving me too little time and no energy for personal interests, hobbies or recreation.

For the disintegration and disharmony of my family life. For my children's rejection of the church I also thank you.

My nervous breakdown I name after the people who could not or would not administer the peace of God in my hours of need mainly because they didn't think ministers should have hours of need.

Finally, let me conclude by saying that while I have dedicated my life to God, my death I dedicate to the church.

Thank you.

For Reflection

If you attend a Church, in what ways does your church care for your minister and his or her family? List the ways.

Get together with some other people in your church and plan to be God's agents of love toward your minister and their family. Here are some possibilities...

- Get everyone in the church to write a letter of appreciation or encouragement for them.
- Make a prayer diary for them. Buy the new years diary early, and have people write a prayer for the minister and their family for every day of the year. An inspirational or encouraging verse could be included for each day.
- Suggest that your council of elders roster four weekends off- at least - for the minister and put it in the church calendar before the year gets under way.
- Get some people to chip in and buy them some tickets to the theatre or a weekends rent at a holiday unit with child minding thrown in as well.
- Have 52 people or families rostered to mail, email, or deliver to their front doorstep, a symbolic love gift to them on the first day of each week.
- Make sure your minister's day off is well known in your church and is respected as untouchable except for real emergencies.

That's some starters for you. If you don't care for these care givers, will anybody else?

Worth Bottling

Bobby cared. He was kind. He liked to help out when he could – which was pretty much all the time. Bobby liked to give. Everybody liked Bobby.

One day someone said. “Bobby’s a great guy”.

“Yep”, everyone agreed.

“His blood is worth bottling’, said another.

“Yep”, everyone agreed.

“So why don’t we?” suggested someone.

“Let’s!”, everyone said.

So they went right up to the tap on Bobby’s heart and got what they wanted.

“Hi Bobby. I’m feeling really down. Can you give me half a litre of that good stuff?”

“Sure. What sort?” Bobby liked to give.

“Some kindness please, Bobby. I’d really appreciate it, mate.”

And Bobby opened himself up and gave his friend what he needed. It helped. His friend felt better. Bobby was glad.

The next in the queue asked, “Can I have a litre please Bobby? The listening kind if you’ve got it please.”

Bobby smiled warmly and said, “Sure. Always prepared to listen to a friend.”

“Three litres of encouragement, thanks Bobby. Can you put it in these take-away bottles? I’m okay at the moment, but I’d like to keep some spare for an emergency. You never know when you’ll need some encouragement on hand.”

“Well okay”, said Bobby who was a little amused.

“A litre and make it quick. I’m in a hurry”, blurted a person who had pushed in to be next in line.”

“Okay”, said Bobby, holding back a rising irritability.

“Two litres, Baby”.

“It’s Bobby”, Bobby corrected.

“Yeah, Baby, Bobby, whatever. Two litres to go. Goodness type.”

Bobby was a little angry now, but couldn’t turn away this rude stranger could he? After all, they obviously needed all the goodness they could get. Bobby gave him two litres.

The queue was long and it was steady. It spanned over a lot of years.

Bobby grew tired. He became pale. He began to wish that he still liked to give because he was no longer sure that he did.

But still the people came to use the tap on his heart. And still he gave what he had.

But one day, when Bobby was looking really pale indeed, there was trouble.

Someone complained, “What’s this you’re giving me, Bobby? This isn’t much good. It’s weak. Give me the full strength stuff if you don’t mind.”

Bobby thought to himself, “Maybe I do mind”, but didn’t dare say it.

Instead he said “Okay. I’m sorry. I’ll try harder.”

He turned the tap on for another serving.

But it wasn't good enough.

"Bobby come on. What is this? Look at it. It's too weak – you can see right through it. If you can't do better than that I can go elsewhere you know. You don't think you're the only one around here whose blood's worth bottling do you? I'll just go to Belinda or Brian. Their blood is still worth bottling." He turned his back and walked off in a huff.

Bobby was shocked. He was hurt. He was disappointed in himself. He felt like a failure. He felt tired. He was weak. He was worried. Soon word would get around that his blood was as weak as water and no longer worth bottling. The thought made him turn another shade paler.

As Bobby worried, another person helped himself to the tap on Bobby's heart, turning it on full as they shoved their recyclable bottle under. But the unthinkable happened.

Nothing came out.

Not a drop. There was none left. The well was dry.

"I'm sorry", Bobby said lamely. "I'm not feeling so great lately". Inside Bobby was so embarrassed. Inside, he was crying, screaming, collapsing, dying, all at the same time. Outside, he turned another shade of pale. The person was unperturbed. "Hey, that's okay. I've got some of your good stuff at home. Always like to keep plenty in reserve for an emergency. I didn't really need this batch anyway."

Bobby got an idea. A flicker of hope came into his tired eyes. He was just about to ask if he could be given some back, but didn't get the chance. He was interrupted. An expert user happened to be walking past when he saw the incident of the empty heart.

“Hey, hey, don’t give up so quickly”, he said to the person who’d just come for the “just-in-case” refill. “I’ve seen this sort of thing before. You can still get some out of him.”

The expert then went into a detailed explanation of how there’s still blood to be had from body and soul even when the heart is empty. “[I] could get blood from a stone if [I] had to. [I]’ll show you how it’s done”.

And before you could say, “Please don’t.”, the expert had pulled out a huge syringe, and jabbed it in deep and drew out several millimetres, then squirted it into her own bottle.

“All it takes is the right equipment you see”, said the stranger with a wink before walking away.

The other was grateful for the tip and went to buy some syringes.

Then Bobby, who was already so pale, paled yet one more shade – the last shade. He paled into insignificance. He was no longer visible. Bobby was gone.

When the person came back with the syringes, Bobby was nowhere to be seen. No problem. It was just a short walk to visit Belinda or Brian.

For Reflection

Who’s wearing you out?

Might you be wearing someone out?

Who are you most like in the story – honestly?

Compassion fatigue. Losing yourself. Dying to self. Casting your pearls before swine. Contemplate each of these.

Do You Realise?

Do you realise how worthwhile your service to God through the Church is? In case you don't, let me encourage you by telling you that you are a part of one of the most noble endeavours people could ever possibly aspire to.

You are helping people in your community discover that they are not alone in this world, because there is a God who loves them. The impact of this truth totally transforms peoples' lives. Totally!

It means they will regard the world as our home, created for us by a generous and caring God. It means that they can come to understand that they are a much loved child of God, along with all the people around them; and so they learn to value the world, themselves and others in new and beautiful ways.

As we introduce people to Jesus and encourage them to follow him, we are inviting them to join us in God's family. We invite them to belong together as our brothers and sisters, who will be challenged to love one another as Christ loved us – sacrificially.

When you serve in or support the church's ministry, you are helping people meet the Master who gives meaning and purpose for their lives. Without meaning, many people conclude, life is not worth living. The God we bring them to has a mission for them to participate in. He enlists them in his team, to be the light of the world and the salt of the Earth, doing good wherever they can. This is the kind of challenge that makes life fulfilling, rewarding and wonderful. The privilege of being co-workers with Christ, caring for people and delivering the love of God to them, does a powerful lot of good for our self esteem. We are a part of the Lord's service, which is an incredible responsibility and privilege. But he trusts us and he counts on us. Co-workers with Jesus Christ – amazing isn't it!

All this in spite of our sins! We have a saviour to share with people who loves us as we are, but loves us too much to leave us that way.

And so he clears away the accumulation of rubbish and dirt we pick up along the road of life, frees us from it and sends us on our way as if we are brand new shiny and clean people. And he does it over and over again, because he loves us.

By drawing people closer to God, we are God's instruments in helping people realise that they can be filled with a new life. There is a creative, inspiring, loving energy available to them, that drives us on to do good works in God's name and in his strength, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is what you are doing for people as you serve God through your church. You are offering them a friendship with God himself! Remember all that God means to you? What a great gift then, to share that with others!

The Church strives to be the body of Christ, living out his life and love in the world. By serving in the church, you are part of the solution to the world's problems. You are one of the ways in which God delivers his love to people. You are being the light of the world. You are being the salt of the Earth! You are helping people discover life in all its fullness. You are helping them catch hold of a life eternal!

Could there be any more noble service than this?

Whether your service is in leadership, financial support, prayer, property maintenance and development – wherever it is that you serve – your service is vital to the health of the church's ministry, vital to searching people in the community, vital to your brothers and sisters in God's family and vital to God himself.

Your service matters! Your part counts! So when you serve, rejoice in that knowledge. Be glad to be a part of it all. Be proud of the work your Church team is doing and prouder still of the God who dares to trust you with your share of the responsibility.

Your service in the church is something fantastic!!

For Reflection

What has been one of your most rewarding experiences in serving God through the church?

If you really embraced the message of this story, how might it affect you?

Can you identify some cynicism about this story's message? If so, draw it out in the open and examine it.

What does your friendship with God mean for you? How might your life be different if others had not helped you to know God?

The Toast

Ladies and Gentlemen, it's my great honour to propose a toast on behalf of the bride, to her loving husband, the groom.

Before I do that though, let me just say how beautiful the bride looks today. Isn't she absolutely radiant ladies and gentlemen? And of course, it's not just that fabulously pure white gown that has her looking so lovely is it!

No it's the radiance shining out from an inner glow that comes from being loved by someone so completely.

And what an appropriate starting place for our toast to the groom. Look at what he has done for his bride! Look at the transformation she has undergone under his love.

We've heard some stories from the bridesmaids in their speeches and from friends in their telegrams, about what our blushing bride used to get up to. We know she'd have a lot to answer for if her husband wasn't so forgiving, so tolerant. But he is indeed blinded by love, or at least so it would seem.

For those of us who knew her in tougher times, it's a delight, a miracle even, to see this sparkle in her eyes, this peacefulness – this relief almost, in her manner; this unassailable joy in her heart. The bad old days are over, the old has passed away in a sea of forgetfulness, and now the new girl is here shining before us. So beautiful. So serene. So much in love and so strong now with hope and confidence in her future.

And why wouldn't she be when her husband has given her such unsurpassing love since the time they first met. There is nothing he wouldn't do for her. He'd die trying to save her if he had to. He has given her his best – his best encouragement, his best wisdom, his best help, his best inspiration and his best comfort in the down times. His love for his bride is celebrated in a very special way on this, their wedding day. And yet his love has been celebrated every day in his lovely ladies heart as his love for her has transformed her little by little each day, until we see her before us now in all her glory. She is indeed a fortunate woman.

But their love for each other has much more depth to it than simply being the kind of love that has the lovers so self-absorbed in their own little kingdom that they are barely aware of the rest of life going on around them. Quite the contrary. Their relationship has led them to experience life in all its fullness –with all its trials, temptations, challenges and celebrations. Over the years the bride and groom have made a formidable team and have done countless good works together making this world a truly better place. Now that their lives have joined even more completely, who knows what great things they will accomplish as they move into the future together? It's going to be such a privilege to be a part of their circle and to experience something of their new life together.

And so I ask us all to be upstanding as we toast Jesus on behalf of his bride, the Church. To Jesus, the most outstanding beloved friend, hero and saviour a bride could ever know. To Jesus.

For Reflection

Consider these discussion questions before reading the story again.

What are some of the characteristics of a typical husband and wife relationship? Include both positive and negative aspects. eg. sometimes they argue, they are committed to each other, they combine their finances and work as a financial team, raise children together, etc.

The Bible sometimes refers to the church as “the bride of Christ.” How do you understand this analogy of Christ’s relationship with the Church?

What aspects of a husband and wife’s relationship would also apply to the relationship between Christ and the Church?

If you are a part of the Church, what good news do you find in the fact that God chose to use this analogy to describe the church’s relationship with Christ?

Sometimes couples decide on the vows they would like to make to each other on their wedding day. Try writing some vows that the Church could make to Jesus, and that Jesus could make to the Church. It may help to first consider some vows you have heard couples make at their weddings.

The Judgement Gifts

I had a dream about my judgement day and it was not at all like I expected.

It was both better and worse.

I arrived in a room, in a little room, with just Jesus and myself. He was sitting beside a Christmas tree that was surrounded by gifts.

It was Christmas. He beckoned me to the tree with all the excitement and joy of a little child. And I was instantly happy and excited too. This was going to be fun. Jesus was just beaming with love and laughter.

He hugged me and quickly gave me a gift to unwrap. It was just the first of many gifts he gave me. I opened it up and in it was the gift of forgiveness. The next present was the keys to a mansion in heaven. Then he gave me eternal life, and then joy, and then righteousness and on and on it went.

Jesus then showed me some wrapping paper from presents that had already been opened. He told me these wrappings represented the presents I'd already received while living on Earth. There was a wrapping paper there for every single prayer of mine that he had answered. There were heaps of wrappings there. Then there were wrappings left over from everything he'd ever done for me without my even asking. I recalled present after present that Jesus had given me.

Jesus was still showing me the gifts I'd received, when I noticed a pile of little presents over in another corner of the room. There were very few of them... They were all small. Some were wrapped shabbily in dirty paper, as if the person who had wrapped them hadn't gone to any effort at all to make the present look special for the one who would receive.

I knew then what those presents were. It dawned on me with a horrible slowness that these were my gifts to Jesus. They were the things I had done in my life which expressed my love to Him. They were the acts of obedience, the love I'd given to others on his behalf, the acts of service and sacrifice, the prayers of praise and love and friendship that I'd given to Jesus.

There were so few presents there. They were so small. They were so grubby. I was ashamed. He deserved so much more. But I had nothing else to give him and it was too late to rectify it now.

If only I had known that judgment would be like this. If only I had known....

For Reflection

What are you thinking? Talk to God about it.

Jesus told a few different parables about Judgement, entering heaven and the kingdom of heaven. Check them out.

The Wedding Feast.	Matthew 22 v 1 – 14.
The Mansion.	John 14 v 1 – 7.
The Hidden Treasure.	Matthew 13 v 44.
The Pearl of Great Worth.	Matthew 13 v 45.
The Net.	Matthew 13 v 47 – 49.
The Ten Girls.	Matthew 25 v 1 – 13.
The Three Servants.	Matthew 25 v 14 – 30.
The Sheep and the Goats.	Matthew 25 v 31 – 46.
The Rich Man and Lazarus.	Luke 16 v 19 – 31.
The New Heaven and the New Earth.	Revelations 20 v 11 – 22 v 5.

The Swing

Grandad sits on the old swing under the shade of the old, old jacaranda tree. No pipe. No cane. No book.

The wind plays with a whisp of his grey hair and throws it around his wrinkled head. I don't want to interrupt him now with his afternoon tea and biscuits. I sit and watch in love.

He mumbles and mutters, not to himself, but to his good friend, God. They talk and laugh together most afternoons under the jacaranda.

The glazed look comes over his eyes now, and the smile and an ever so gently to and fro-ing on the swing.

He is remembering.

I know because he's told me before. And in all his rememberings I have never seen him look sad. Never upset. Never ashamed, or remorseful, or despairing.

How can a person live so long and never cause a regret that will come creeping back to haunt and to hurt – to twist the knife as the do the slow mind dance called “old age sits and remembers?”

I sat on this same swing just last night. I wrestled with a much shorter past, a much nearer lifetime. I regret already. I worry. I feel shame. Already I am sorry and yet my life journey has practically just begun. How do I arrive at seventy, look back and feel good about my life?

I swang furiously to and fro on our swing. Angry at myself and at others. Feeling foolish about my own mistakes and disgust at the mistakes of others.

But not Grandad. He swings ever so gently, a soft glaze of remembering in his eyes, the smile that comes and goes and the mutterings and chucklings between him and his good mate, God. Perhaps Grandad never sinned, never failed, never made a fool of himself, never hurt anyone.

No. I know that's not true.

What then? Is it that he learned to gather his mistakes, stack them in a line and use them as stepping stones to a better life? It sound nice, but no.

The answer's there in Grandad's chucklings and mutterings. As he and God sit and chat together in the afternoons under the jacaranda, there is forgiveness and there is love. There is a friendship so cleansing that it reaches through the years and accepts and purifies them all.

I will take Grandad his afternoon tea. But not all of it. I'll keep a couple of biscuits. Today God and I will share afternoon tea together too.

For Reflection

While the story is fresh in your mind, have a good chat with God. Go for a walk together if you can. Talk to God about the story – summarise it for him and tell God what you thought it was saying to you. Talk to God about your relationship. Talk to him about your life. Enjoy God's company. Be silent sometimes too. Give God the chance to talk back to you, with in your heart, mind or soul.

Thank You

I thought I'd say this now, in case I can't say it then.

Well God, it's been great! We've sure had some good times haven't we? Thanks for life. It was excellent. I'm handing it back now. It's my present to you.

I know it's a bit shabby. Full of imperfection, sin, failure, mistakes, lost opportunities. I'd be too embarrassed to try giving it to you as a present like this except for the fact that you love me. I know you'll look at it with compassion – like a father receiving a child's imperfect, immature artwork.

Smiling, interested, accepting and grateful for the love with which the gift is given.

The love and forgiveness of Jesus has washed away all those grubby smudges I've put on the canvas of my life. And I can tell you, I am eternally grateful for that.

God you've been such a good friend. God- the Father, Jesus my Lord and Saviour. The Holy Spirit –comforter, inspiration and power source that lights up my life. Creator, guide, counsellor, lifesaver, bodyguard, shoulder to cry on, punching bag for all my frustration, kindly janitor of heart, mind and soul, colleague, confidant, friend.

And now, I come to meet you face to face, in a new way. It's part exciting and part mysterious. I'd feel like a pen pal meeting his friend for the first time except that I do know you Lord. I have seen you in Jesus. You were there in the love of family and friends too. I'll recognise that love again when I meet you in person.

So, it won't be strange for me, God. And it won't be at all strange for you will it? You're well versed on this particular human. No secrets from you God.

I guess you'll be completely prepared for this wide open look. I'll probably be wearing it on my face when I see you. A look which says, "Wow, it really is all true!"

And you? You'll laugh and say, "I told you so!"

So, here I come, my friend. Excited and curious and with a healthy respect for your awesome, glorious excellence.

Lay your purity on me, God. Grant me your righteousness because I'm afraid I won't be bringing much with me when I come.

You have been so faithful to me in this life, Lord. You have never let me down and I know you won't now.

Lord, the people who will miss me – bless them. Love them. Comfort them. Cheer them. May they know the divine love that has meant so much to me.

Could, you give everyone a hug from me somehow? I don't know how. Tell them to hug one another and say, "This one's from you-know-who. Their love for you lives on better and bigger than ever before."

And, Lord, tell them I'm sorry if I hurt them or disappointed them. Tell them to be at peace, if they imagine any damage they may have done me. Their love was such a privilege; such a precious gift. I have nothing but love and appreciation for them here in my heart.

Tell them to enjoy life and to enjoy you too, God. Tell them to dive into the refreshing, invigorating, purifying, healing sea of your endless love. Tell them to wrap their arms around you and squeeze you into their very being with all the love they can muster, until their thoughts are your thoughts, their love your love and their will your will.

Sorry, I'm preaching at you, God. Just love them and look after them. Okay?

Yes, I know you do already. I guess it's just that I'll miss them till they join me and I want the best for them. I love them so much, so very much.

And now, God, my friend, here is my letter of introduction into the next life and my thank-you note for the last one.

Come, Lord Jesus, put your arm around my shoulder, like you've done so many times before. Come and walk me home.

For Reflection

What words would you like to leave behind on your own departure? What would you want to say to God before leaving this world? What would you like to say to your loved ones?

How about writing your own "Thank you" note to God and to the people who matter. You might be called morbid, but tell someone you trust where your thank you letter is kept. It could mean a great deal to those who read it.

Other Publications by Tom Kerr

God MA – God for Mature Audiences Only – 3rd Edition contains some choice selections from the following publications also by Tom Kerr.

Wriggle. *Tracing Around An Invisible Wriggling God.*

Lots of spiritual toys to play with for the inner child in all of us.

Stories for children to read on their own and also for use in family devotions, children's groups, worship and Religious Education in schools.

Sparkle !

Devotional stories, spiritual sparklers, to light up the way for the teenage soul in all of us.

Tom's stories from R.I.P., If Jesus Were A Teenager Today, A.D. Magazine, Australian Surfing Life, Top Gear and 8 new releases. For use by and with teenagers.

Bumping Into God

[Insert subhead and blurb here]

Available from Tom Kerr direct at Tom.Kerr@yacmu.ucaqld.com.au or through the Uniting Church bookshop in Queensland.

A 10% discount applies for the purchase of all three books at once.

Attractive discounts also apply to bulk purchases of 10 or more books.

Graff Artist, Tim Kerr is available for commissioned art work.

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Subject Index