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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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5th May: Easter 6

A CULTURE SHOCK FOR THE APOSTLE

By the Revd Peter G. Jarvis
Exeter

Acts 17:22-31

Paul probably welcomed the chance to visit Athens. The ancient glories of the city had long since departed, but Athens had bequeathed to the world a splendid heritage of architecture, sculpture, drama and philosophy. It sounds as if the apostle came to the city almost like a modern tourist, eager to see the sights and experience the ethos of the place. He certainly kept his eyes open and saw much to impress him and much to anger him. 'The city was full of idols' (v. 16) – statues of gods and goddesses, altars dedicated to them, shrines where people worshipped them. Paul, with his Jewish upbringing and Jewish prejudices, found all this abhorrent. To him the religion of these pagan Greeks was a mixture of idolatry and superstition, and he wanted to persuade them to turn from idols to worship the true and living God.

Paul at Athens – a tourist, a sightseer, but also an evangelist, a missionary. The marketplace at Athens was rather like Speakers' Corner in London. People gathered there for discussion and argument, people with bees in their bonnets, ideas to peddle, and opinions to express. Paul joined them, anxious to have his say and preach the Gospel. He aroused interest in some quarters, opposition in others. Some asked contemptuously, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Some commented, 'He seems to be proclaiming foreign divinities' (v. 18). Further investigation was necessary, so they gave Paul the opportunity to explain himself before the Areopagus – a court which dealt with educational, moral and religious matters.

If Luke's summary of Paul's speech is at all accurate, the apostle must have been more than

usually tactful. He was at pains not to antagonize his hearers, doing his best to find as much common ground as possible between himself and them. He didn't take the text for his address from the Jewish scriptures, but from an inscription he had seen in the city, which said, 'To an unknown god'. Interpreting this as an admission of ignorance, Paul, with a touch of Jewish arrogance, undertook to enlighten his audience, to make this unknown god known, to introduce them to 'the God who made the world and everything in it' and who would finally 'judge the world in righteousness'. In contrast to the many gods and goddesses of Greek religion, Paul presented them with the one and only God of Jewish religion. He went on to claim that the whole human race would be judged by a man whom God had appointed; a man whom God had already raised from the dead. This clearly referred to Jesus, but Paul didn't name him. He was saying that ultimately everybody would be judged by Christian standards.

There were no scriptural quotes in the speech; instead a couple of quotes from Greek poets. One of them had declared of the supreme God that 'in him we live and move and have our being'. Another had pointed to God as our Father: 'For we too are his offspring.' And Paul insisted that this God was involved in human life ('not far from each one of us'), present and active at all times and in all places.

In first-century Greece, many people thought of God as a theoretical possibility rather than a proven reality, a doubtful hypothesis rather than an actual fact. To many modern people, as to those Athenians, God is an unknown quantity. He is absent, not present; passive, not active. Such people behave as if God didn't exist, or at least didn't matter. Our task, like the apostle's, is to make the unknown God known, to persuade people that he is neither absent nor passive, but present and active, revealing himself in the natural world, in human history, and in

individual human lives, including their own. The Church's task, said Max Warren, is 'to unveil the God who is already there'. But how do we do it? Through signs and symbols; through stories and parables; through literature, music, drama, art; but above all through the way we live and the messages we unconsciously convey. So many of us are opaque: God's light doesn't shine through us. We need to become transparent to that light, as Jesus was, so that it shines through us, as it shone through him, undistorted and undimmed. 'Let your light so shine before others that they may see the good you do and give glory to your Father in heaven.'

'In him we live and move and have our being.' These words are saying that God is the supreme reality, the ground of our being, in whom we exist, and without whom we wouldn't exist at all. People often imagine that they can get along without him very well, but sooner or later life puts them in a position where they feel their need of him. When people ignore or forget him (which we're all apt to do at times), he makes his presence felt, often in curious and unexpected ways. He suddenly discloses himself, takes us by surprise, comes alive to us, enabling us to come alive to him.

But there are people who have seriously searched for God, but failed to find him; and people who believed they'd found him in some adolescent experience, but have since lost him. To such people God says (through the prophet Jeremiah 29:13): 'You will find me, if you seek me with all your heart.'

Paul pictured all mankind as seeking for God, 'in the hope that they might feel after him and find him'. But he recognized that the game of hide-and-seek between God and man had been ended in Jesus. The God who sometimes seems so hard to find, so difficult to identify, so impossible to pin down, confronts us in Jesus, who seeks and saves the lost, who rescues us from our self-centred view of life, enabling us to see life as God-centred, and ourselves as entirely dependent on him for 'life and breath and everything'.

We can stop searching for God. He has found us in Christ. He finds us here, wherever that may be, and he finds us now, whenever that may be. He is the God of the here and now, and our happiness consists in discovering this, and being in tune with this ever-present, ever-active, ever-living God, in whom 'we live and move and have our being'.

12th May: Easter 7

OUR GOD REIGNS?

*By the Revd M. F. Camroux
Cheam, Surrey*

Acts 1:6-14

The Ascension is one of those parts of the New Testament where a lot of people find themselves asking whatever this can be about? My problem is different. I know what the story's about – I simply have trouble seeing how it can be true.

Firstly, then, what does it mean? Obviously the Ascension is not a literal account of a physical event. If you could have flown over Israel that day it is very unlikely you would have seen Jesus passing the end of the wing. Rather this is a way of putting a truth about Jesus in pictorial terms. We are being told that Jesus, after his crucifixion and resurrection, entered heaven to be united for ever with the power and glory of God himself. To the question 'Where is Jesus now?' the answer is given – Jesus is reigning over the world at the right hand of God the Father. A few years ago, there was a popular hymn which had the chorus 'Our God reigns'. Today Luke points us to Jesus – and says just that – 'Our God reigns'. Christ reigns over all – the world is built around his love.

That's the idea. My problem isn't understanding it. My problem is – is it true? Take a look around you. Suicide bombers devastate New York. Old scores are settled in Afghanistan. Catholic children are abused in Belfast. 17 million babies die every year from poverty-induced disease while arms traders thrive. Our God reigns? Do you think so? Does it look like it?

The obvious utterly unmistakable fact is that on the face of it God does not reign. His will is not done on earth as it is in heaven. Canon Paul Oestreicher tells of taking part in a peace service. And the worshippers were repeating over and over again the chorus 'Our God reigns, our God reigns, Our God reigns'. At first to Oestreicher it felt good. Then the contrast between the cosy words of the chorus and the harsh realities of the world overwhelmed him and he found it impossible to go on singing. He heard an inner voice saying to him. 'That's a lie. Our God does not reign. This is false comfort.'

How can we talk of Christ's love ruling and reigning over a world like this? There is only one

place to start. We must go to Calvary. There we see a man battered, bruised and suffering. At first he stands silent and helpless before his accusers. Then he is taken to a place called the skull, and nails are driven through his hands and his feet and he is hung on the gallows. They mock him. 'He saved others but he cannot save himself.' Deserted by his followers, alone with his agony he dies.

Calvary makes certain realities unmistakably clear. First, the world can be a terrible place. Often the innocent do suffer and love is crucified. But there is more to see on Calvary than simply an innocent man suffering. As they take down the blood-stained corpse it seems that the suffering has been pointless and evil triumphant. As for Pilate and Caiaphas they are certain it is all over – the foolish dreamer from Nazareth will soon be forgotten. But now in retrospect how differently it looks!

Today Caiaphas and Pilate are long forgotten and the Crucified one is worshipped still by millions. Who could have believed that the most significant figure in history would turn out to be a Galilean carpenter who never wrote a book, owned little more than the clothes he stood up in, taught a few followers mostly in small lakeside towns, and was put to that terrible death? And who could have believed that bloody scene at Calvary would turn out to be the moment when love's greatest victory was won?

To say that Christ reigns over the world is not to say God is controlling everything so that nothing happens which he does not will. It is to say that the suffering love ultimately has a power which nothing else can match.

This is the truth we see on Calvary but it is a truth which is to be found in life. In the winter of 1956 five American missionaries penetrated the jungles of Ecuador in the hope of preaching the Gospel to a tribe of Auca Indians. This was a daring thing to do because the only thing known about the Auca was that they killed every outsider who tried to establish contacts with them. When no word came back from the missionaries after several weeks the government sent in a search-party by helicopter, and from the air they saw the spear-riddled bodies of the missionaries floating in a river near the shore. It must have seemed that this was the end of the story.

In fact it was the beginning. The widow of one of the murdered missionaries Elizabeth Elliot, was left with a three-year-old daughter Valerie. Instead of returning to the United States she chose to stay and

attempt to carry through her husband's work. It seemed an insane ambition. Neither she nor anyone else knew the Auca language and there was no reason to suppose that she would not meet exactly the same fate as her husband had.

Then one day unexpectedly two Auca girls ventured to the edge of the jungle where they became fascinated by the signs of civilization. By winning their friendship Elizabeth Elliot persuaded them to live for a time at the mission station and managed to establish simple communications with them. After learning the basics of the language and carrying her three-year-old child she went back into the jungle with the girls to the tribe who had killed her husband.

At first they were hostile but because of the two Auca girls they did not kill her and her child but let her live among them. For a whole year she stayed with them. She made no effort to preach to them but simply shared their lives. She did tell them she was the wife of one of those they had killed but that she forgave them. An understanding began to grow. She saw there was more to the Auca than the savages people imagined them to be. She offered them love. They grew to regret their killing of the missionaries. Finally some became Christians and real positive changes began to happen in their lives.

The Gospel is that love is the ultimate power of life. It may appear to be weak. It may sometimes be crucified. But in the end love moves the world. When all that violence and power can do has turned to ashes the victories of love will remain. As Philip Larkin wrote, 'what will survive of us is love'. This morning in a world of violence and hatred this is something to hold onto. This morning the proclamation that from a cross Jesus rules and reigns can take away our fears and send us back to a troubled world with a new hope. This morning is a good day to look at the cross and say 'Our God reigns'.

19th May: Pentecost

GO WITH THE FLOW!

*By the Revd Colin Sedgwick, MA, MTh
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Numbers 11:24-30

It was truly a picture postcard scene: a remote hillside, a clear blue sky, a glorious view, and a tiny

stream bubbling at my feet. There was a lot to focus on. But one thought struck me in particular: 60 or 70 miles away that same little stream – a stream I could literally step over without the slightest effort – would be a river some hundreds of yards across, flowing through an industrial city.

What comes to the mind of the Christian when you talk about the Holy Spirit? Well, there are the memorable passages in John's Gospel where Jesus promises his frightened disciples that he will send them 'another Comforter to be with you for ever'; there are Paul's great verses about the 'gifts' and the 'harvest' of the Spirit; perhaps most of all, there is the momentous event of Acts 2, the Pentecost outpouring when the infant church was baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Great verses! But trace them back to their source, so to speak, and you can't help but be startled at the modesty of their beginnings – just like that stream I admired so much. The Spirit, still thought of as an 'it' rather than a 'he', and really only warranting a small 's', is hinted at in many parts of the Old Testament, and it is fascinating to see how this strand of teaching grows and swells until we come to the Gospels and Acts.

Moses, in Numbers 11, is at breaking point. He talks to God with a bluntness which most of us would shrink from as irreverence bordering on blasphemy. He's had these wretched people of Israel right up to *here*: 'I cannot carry all these people by myself, the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now ...' (vv. 14–15). So there!

God takes pity on him. He is told to gather seventy elders of Israel, and the spirit which rests upon Moses is imparted also to them; as proof, 'they prophesied'. Moses will no longer be alone in his back-breaking, spirit-sapping task.

But wait, something isn't quite right! Puffing and sweating, a youngster comes running: two elders who weren't part of the group 'are prophesying in the camp!' Joshua is decidedly put out: 'Moses, my lord, stop them!' But Moses refuses: 'I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!' Relax, Joshua! Who's in charge here? You? me? Or God?

This dramatic event tucked away in the far distance of the Old Testament has much to say in preparing the way for the full-blown New Testament doctrine.

First, we are reminded that *in order to do God's work we need God's Spirit*. The seventy elders were not equipped to share Moses' load until the Spirit had come upon them. And so it is with us. Whether leaders or not, if we are so foolish as to set about the exciting, demanding, cross-bearing business of living the Christian life without a conscious dependence on the Spirit, we are heading for frustration, exhaustion and disillusionment. The Spirit (whatever else he may be) is the *energy* of God, giving life and vitality. The New Testament doesn't tell us to 'be filled with the Spirit' as a kind of luxury add-on for the Christian life, but as an absolute necessity; our very survival is at stake.

Jesus said, 'If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him'. But don't we have the Holy Spirit already? Of course we do. You can't be a Christian at all apart from the Spirit! But that doesn't mean we can't have more! Pray for the Holy Spirit as if your life depended on it – because in a very real sense it does.

Second, we are reminded that *God gives the Spirit as he alone sees fit*. So Eldad and Medad missed out on the big event, did they? So what? God was well able to grant the Spirit to them exactly where they were. 'The wind blows where it pleases,' says Jesus; '... and so it is with everyone born of the Spirit ...'

Be encouraged, then. You never know when God is about to do something new by his Spirit. All right, Pentecost was predicted by the risen Christ; but who would have imagined either the strangeness or the power or the drama of that event when it actually took place! The art of living the Christian life is, in very large part, to get on happily with the ordinary, the routine, the predictable – but without ever giving up on the possibility of the exceptional, the life-changing. Enjoy the mundane; expect the shattering!

Third, we are reminded that *the Spirit of God cannot be boxed in or pinned down*. Joshua, jealous for Moses' position and reputation, gets excited and affronted. And plenty of others have followed in his footsteps. 'Lord!' say James and John, the fiery brothers among Jesus' twelve, 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us ...' *He is not one of us ...* How shocking! Could any remark be more revealing? God forgive us when we subconsciously

(or, indeed, consciously) think we alone are in possession of God's truth and power.

'Tell your disciples to be quiet!' the authorities demand of Jesus as he enters Jerusalem for the last time; 'who do they think they are?' 'I tell you,' replies Jesus, 'if they keep quiet the very stones will cry out...'

The problem is endemic in the Church: a compound of jealousy, anxiety, traditionalism and (let's be fair) a genuine desire for orderliness and propriety. 'The Holy Spirit can't have been given,' protests the traditional Anglican; why, the bishop hasn't laid on hands! 'The Holy Spirit can't have been given,' protests the ardent Pentecostalist; why, the person in question hasn't spoken in tongues! From one point of view the history of the Church can be seen as 2000 years of caging the Holy Spirit, denying him the right to be, as Jesus said, free as the wind.

Perhaps it is of comfort to us to know that the early church experienced this dilemma just as we do: the same Paul who urged that 'everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way' also insisted that we should be 'filled with the Spirit', that we should not 'quench the Spirit'. Yes, we need to be careful. But one thing is sure: it's better to sail, exhilarated, on a mighty if dangerous river, than to squat dejectedly in a puddle.

26th May: Trinity Sunday

MAKING DISCIPLES

*By the Revd Chris Knights, BA, PhD, PGCert
Whitley Bay*

Matthew 28:19

A few years back, in common I suspect with most church leaders in North East England, I received a circular letter from MORRIS CERULLO WORLD EVANGELISM OF GREAT BRITAIN, informing me that Dr Morris Cerullo, an American Evangelist, was going to come to Newcastle City Hall to conduct a major evangelistic rally, and inviting me – and through me the members of my church – to support this campaign in prayer, in follow-up and no doubt also financially.

And my heart sank. For I, I suspect like many people, have a deep unease about the wisdom and the rightness of mass evangelistic rallies, with their hard-sell presentation of the Gospel, and their

pressure on people to declare to be for Jesus – to be converted. It all smacks too much of emotionalism, sensationalism and blackmail to make me want to be any part of it.

But as I allowed myself to give vent to my opposition to this letter from Morris Cerullo World Evangelism of Great Britain, I remembered a story I'd once read about the great American evangelist of the early twentieth century, D. L. Moody, for whom big evangelistic rallies were part and parcel of daily life.

Moody was once travelling on a train when a stranger accosted him. 'You're Moody, aren't you?' he said. 'Well, let me tell you, Mr Moody, I don't like your methods.' 'Really?' said Moody. 'I'm not fully satisfied with them myself. Tell me, how do you win souls?' 'Oh,' said the man in some confusion, 'I – I don't.' 'In that case,' said Moody quietly, 'I prefer the way I do it to the way you – don't.'

It is so, so easy for us to decry the Billy Grahams or Morris Cerullus of this world for their mass campaigns preaching the Gospel in a certain way – but I wonder: are we like the stranger in the story: criticizing people for doing something that is of the essence of the Church, namely bearing witness to Jesus when actually we don't do it at all?

For evangelizing – bearing public witness to our faith in Jesus Christ – is an essential task of the Church, and not just of some people in the Church – we are to be a witnessing people just as much as we are to be a worshipping, praying, Bible-reading people.

And the reasons why we need to be an evangelizing and witnessing church are, firstly, because the Gospel we believe in is, if it is true, the most amazing Good News there can be – and news that is good surely must be shared with others, just as the news of the birth of a baby, for instance, is rapidly shared with all and sundry. The Good News of the Gospel is much, much more than the good news of the birth of a baby: that there *is* a God, that this God loves each one of us personally, and loves us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to the earth to die for us so that we could be brought back to God despite us having turned away from him, that because of that life and death, our life here on earth has a meaning and a purpose and an ultimate goal – heaven – if we would but turn away from selfishness and our self to God and to Jesus and to following him.

There *is* hope, there *is* joy, there is a purpose to it all – in this life as well as in the next. Surely that is good news we want to share, not keep to ourselves.

And we must witness, we must evangelize, because Jesus has told us to. Michael Ramsey has commented on how the idea of obedience as a Christian witness has rather slipped out of our contemporary religion, and he laments this, and reminds us that part of being a Christian is precisely this seeking to obey the commands of Jesus. 'If you love me you will keep my commandments', Jesus said – and one of his commands to his followers, as we have just heard, was to go into the whole world and make disciples of all nations. He has told us: dare we disobey?

And we must bear witness, we must evangelize because we will be held accountable by God for the souls of those around us if we do not. In the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, the prophet is described as a watchman, watching for the coming of God. The prophet is told to tell the people of that coming – it is then up to the people to decide whether they respond to it or not. Whether the people respond or not is not the prophet's problem: rather, he is told that if he knows that God is coming and he doesn't tell others, so that they never even have the chance to make a decision about it, he – the prophet – is guilty. If he does tell them, and they refuse to listen, they are guilty themselves, but the prophet is not.

And we are just like the prophet. If we do not seek to tell those around us about Jesus and his love, the blood of those around us will be on our heads. If we do tell, and our message is rejected, our hearer's blood is on their own heads. We will have done our duty.

'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel', said St Paul. Woe, indeed – but *how* do we preach the Gospel? We do it by our lives, by our words and by our deeds: by what we are, by what we say and by what we do.

There is no doubt that one of the most powerful witnesses to the love and the truth of God in Jesus Christ is that of a holy and humble Christian life. We all know or know of people whose whole personality and whole way of life seems to reflect the love of God: Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa spring readily to my mind.

But it's not out of the reach of the rest of us – 'The best way to show is to shine' is an old adage, but a true adage. It's one of the most damning

indictments of the Church that most Christians are so *un*christlike, so selfish, so driven by self-interest. Seeking to model our lives and our lifestyles on that of Christ is at the heart of our duty to show the Christian faith we profess to others. Even just wearing a lapel cross every day would be a significant step!

But there is a time to speak as well. We cannot pretend that people will catch the Christian faith just by seeing our lives. Very often people want to know why we are Christians: 'what do you want to go to church for?' is how the question often comes out. Could you answer that question if it was put to you tomorrow? If you can't, then stop and think about it, and get an answer together, for your personal reasons why you have faith are the most powerful evangelistic tools I know of. And the way to share them is when you're challenged about them, rather than ramming them down other people's throats all the time – you'll get no thanks nor make any progress by doing that.

And the talking should be on a one-to-one level. To be sure, big evangelistic rallies and church sermons do have their place, and so do Christian assemblies in school, which is why I never lightly refuse an invitation to do one, but many more people come to true and lasting faith by one-to-one contact with Christian friends, relatives and neighbours. And that's what we're called to do – not to stand up on a soap-box on a street corner and shout about Jesus to all and sundry. And our prayers should be similarly focused – by name for those whom we meet day by day, that we may have opportunity to share something of the love of God with them.

By our lives, by our words – and by our deeds as well: we proclaim and show forth the Christian faith as much in acts of service, acts of charity towards others, just as much as by our lives and words. And when we serve others, we are really serving Christ in others, as well as serving others in Christ's name. And that serving activity is in itself an act of witness to our Christian faith and to our Christian commitment.

Being, speaking, serving. The three ways in which we can communicate the faith we hold to those around us. And we must do that communicating both as individuals and as a church. We can never be complacent. The number of people in this area who do not own the faith of Jesus far exceeds those who do. And God wants to reach those people – our

friends, our neighbours, our families. And we – the Church in this place – are the way he does it.

It is said that when Jesus had finished his work on earth and had returned to heaven, the angel Gabriel met Him. 'Lord', said Gabriel, 'is it permitted to ask what plans you have made for carrying on your work on earth?' 'I have chosen twelve men and some women,' said Jesus, 'they will pass my message on till it reaches the whole world.' 'But,' said the angel, 'supposing those few people fail you – what other plans have you made?' Jesus smiled, 'I have no other plan,' he said, 'I am counting on them.'

And he's counting on us. Let's not let him down.

ON BEING A HOSPITAL CHAPLAIN

By the Revd Dr Ewan Kelly

Chaplain, The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh

Text of a sermon preached on the occasion of the Service of Introduction and Commissioning for the Revd Carrie Upton as Chaplain at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Edinburgh and Liberton Hospital (principally a hospital caring for the elderly), Edinburgh on Sunday, 30 September 2001.

The word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us (John 1:14a, Good News Bible).

Georgina Nelson, a chaplaincy colleague working in St John's Hospital, Livingston, wrote these insightful words:

Underpinning all else, and holding together the multiplicity of roles which may fall to the chaplain, there is the chaplain's most basic calling: to be, to be present and to be himself.

To be present and to be yourself . . . is the fundamental calling of any chaplain seeking to minister in a healthcare setting.

Over six years ago I started my first job as a hospital chaplain in the Southern General in Glasgow. The neurosurgical intensive care unit in the Southern is not only at times, as its name suggests, a very intense place to work in or to visit but it is also very busy. For the first six months of my new job in the Southern I found approaching the door of that unit, let alone opening it, was enough to stimulate my autonomic nervous system – the palms of my hands would dampen, my forehead would

glisten, my stomach would tighten and my mouth dry up. In short, I found it very difficult to work in the unit at first and it took me some time and several conversations with discerning others to begin to work out why.

Before studying for the ministry I had been a medical student and had worked as a junior doctor. I had been trained to do things for people, to be task orientated – to take medical histories, to examine people, to make differential diagnoses and order investigations and treat with others what was discovered. I was more comfortable in the face of pain and hurt, trauma and disease with either sticking something in someone, doing something to them or for them. My role, it seemed to me, as a young doctor had been to try to cure and alleviate through doing. However as a chaplain I had no such role and I felt helpless, anxious and incompetent.

However that was, as John Bell puts it in the title of one his songs, 'A Touching Place', because helpless was how relatives who sat by the bedside of an unconscious loved one, and also how very often other healthcare staff, felt in the face of major trauma or serious disease.

It took me a while to realize a chaplain's role is not to do but to be, not to cure but to care, not to fix but to live with. To live with helplessness and pain and to share it, for a while, with those who also felt it.

Sheila Cassidy, who worked as the medical director of a hospice in the South of England, created in her well-known book *Sharing the Darkness* a series of sketches to illustrate what it can mean to be with others in their suffering. The first sketch depicts healthcare professionals in doing mode, and no doubt appropriately so, with a patient – the doctor with her stethoscope and dressed in a white coat, the nurse in her uniform and the priest sharing the sacraments. In the next sketch the carer has no obvious equipment and is not wearing a uniform but is utilizing other tools of their trade – learnt counselling skills – actively and reflectively listening. The final sketch depicts carer and patient stark naked. Vulnerable and helpless and stripped of all their resources – sharing the suffering and desolation of that moment.

Sometimes there is nothing we can do, nothing we can say to improve a person's well-being or alter their situation. Nothing but to be as we are and feel as we feel, allowing the other to be themselves too.

James is eight and his mum is a priest. One day James was out playing with his pals in the garden when his mum called them in for tea. 'And don't forget to wash your hands, boys, before you come to the table,' was James' mum's parting shot before she disappeared back into the house. James and his pals, dirty though they were, were rather reticent about performing their ablutions so much so that James was heard to mutter, by his mum, as he stomped in from the garden, 'Germs and Jesus, that's all I ever hear about in this house – and I've never seen either of them.'

Contrary to James' experience of life, the Word did become a human being and lived among us. God became flesh and blood, in the human form of Jesus and was physically present with us.

Incarnation is central to chaplaincy. A chaplain in being present with others in hospital personifies the love and care of Christ. She embodies God's love, in Christ, for those who wait and wonder, for those who hope and fear and for those who celebrate and give thanks.

There are countless healthcare workers in this country who by their love, care and compassion significantly help to improve the health and morale of our hospitals and of those who wait and work in them. Embodying the love and peace of God is not limited to chaplains nor indeed to Christians. However chaplains visibly represent, embody, God's presence in a hospital community.

Hospitals are places where the physical predominates. Therefore in places which are earthy, messy and mucky chaplains are a reminder that God is present, God is there, as people respond to tumour and trauma, sickness and surgery, as well the ordinary daily ward routines of meal times, drug trolleys and commodes.

More than that chaplains also by being present are a reminder that there is more to healthcare than considering bowel habits and blood results, and more to healthcare than clinical effectiveness and keeping within budgets. The physical and the financial are only part, though an important part, of hospital life.

Chaplains are a reminder of that which is other and mysterious in our human experience, that which is less tangible, measurable and auditable but nonetheless essential to individual and corporate well-being. A chaplain being present in a hospital raises awareness of the spiritual dimension – possibilities of transcendence and hope in any situa-

tion and the universal need of humans to search for meaning and purpose in the face of suffering and death as well as in life itself. Chaplains are only a small part of the healthcare team which is daily offering spiritual care to patients and their loved ones but chaplains are a visible symbol of that element of support.

As when any of us starts a new job, other people have expectations of recently appointed chaplains in their new role. The church, the hospital management, the staff you are working with and the patients and relatives you meet with expect you to fulfil a certain role. People project all sorts of feelings and assumptions on to clergy, and chaplains are no different in this respect.

Jesus too suffered from the same legacy – holy men, politicians and ordinary folk all tried to pigeon-hole him and wanted him to conform to their expectations, to their rules. Jesus, however, responded by being true to himself and his interpretation of God's will for himself, as he lived among us.

Are we as chaplains willing to risk being ourselves? Are we willing to risk revealing what lies behind the safety shield of our dog-collars, sacramental tools and religious language if they are going to block authentic communication? Are we willing not to conform to the expectations, the unwritten rules of others if it means compromising who we really are and what we believe our role is?

In short, are we willing to risk being human, being vulnerable and therefore true to the story of which we are a part? As Walter Brueggemann, a biblical scholar, puts it, 'The biblical tradition is not about control but about vulnerability.'

Are we willing to risk not being in control but willing instead to be present as ourselves, alongside those who are struggling to live with helplessness, confusion, boredom or loss? Are we willing to hear their story first then, and only then, utilize the resources of our tradition in creative and imaginative ways to meet their needs?

You are called by God to work within this Trust as a chaplain, but first and foremost you are called as a human being – to be what you are. The greatest gift you have to offer to others as they struggle and search, watch and wait in hospital, is your humanity. Your willingness and integrity to be, to be present and to be yourself will, as Georgina Nelson put it, 'free others to be, to be present and to be themselves' too.