

Lent Meditation 2010



TRAC,
TRINITY ANNUAL CONFERENCE

INTRODUCTION TO THE MEDITATIONS

For this year's Lent Meditations, the Board of Worship invited four persons from very diverse backgrounds to write the devotions. They bring with them the lessons and struggles they have learned as they themselves walked with God. May your journey during Lent this year be truly blessed as you spend time with these meditations.

1. Turning to God in Daily Life

We all know that God is with us all the time. But in the hustle and bustle of life, how often do we sense His abiding presence? This set of readings reminds us to 'practise the presence of God' in our daily life and to cultivate our friendship with Him who loves us. The writer also leads us to examine our attitudes to our work in view of God's calling and purpose for our lives. As you ponder on the questions at the end of each day's reading, may you find yourself inexorably drawn into the presence of God our constant and loving Friend.

2. Turning to God with the Mystics

Christian mystics and mysticism have been very much a part of our Church history but most of us know very little about them. Here the writer introduces us to six mystics--three monks and three nuns from medieval Spain, Italy and England, spanning the 12th to the 16th centuries. Their lives were marked by self-denial and a deliberate detachment from earthly things as they sought to know the love of God. These devout men and women not only spent extended times in contemplation of the Scriptures and in prayer but they also actively served the poor, the sick and the needy in their communities. May we be inspired by their whole-hearted devotion to God and may we learn from them what it means to receive God's love and to share it with the world. To find out more about their writings, you can go to the Christian Classics Ethereal Library at www.ccel.org.

3. Turning to God through the Gospels

A person who has never read the Bible before is usually encouraged to begin with the Gospels because they are "easier to understand". But when a text becomes too familiar, we tend to read it casually. This set of readings takes us through some well-known passages like the Lord's Prayer, the Good Samaritan and John 3:16. Sound familiar? That is all the

more reason to read these selections thoughtfully as the writer shares with us his reflections and helps us to see through new lenses the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

4. Turning to God through the Hymns

Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord. (Eph. 5:18b-19)

The Scriptures (psalms), hymns and spiritual songs are an integral part of our Christian life and the worship of the living God. Hymns that are replete with scriptural truths teach us about God and lift our hearts and thoughts heavenward, even before the throne of grace, and lead us to bow down in worship. In these journal-like entries, we get to know the writer, his family and friends, and his spiritual journeys. More importantly, he shares how much the lyrics and music of the hymns have touched him and helped him to know God's love. Let us, like the writer, sing the hymns so often that the lyrics become encoded in our hearts and minds -- that, from our lips, hymns and spiritual songs will burst forth in joyous praise of God all day long. May we be drawn closer to God even as we sing and make melody to Him. (The writer has also included web-links to the Internet if you wish to listen to these hymns.)

Further reading:

This section has additional readings of Scripture taken from the daily lectionary.

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THE EDITORS

FOREWORD

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We live in a world of advancing technologies that have increased the pace of life and allow us to tailor our choices according to our likes and dislikes. We have instant coffee, instant noodles and microwave fare that is ready in a matter of seconds. We have iPods and MP3 players that allow us to pick and choose only what we want to hear.

Some of us relish this world of speed and tailor-made choices, getting into it without a qualm. Others find it a struggle and are toiling just to keep up.

Into this world, God speaks a word, “Turn. Turn from all that which takes you away from Me, from Life. Turn from the struggling and toiling that has worn you out.”

It is the prayer of the Board that these meditations will help us to pause and turn from that which takes us away from God and towards that which will nourish us and draw us back to our God.

We want to say thank you to the writers, Dr Samuel Ong, Mr Alvin Ung, Dr Voon Choon Khing, and Mr P. Sakthivel who have graciously given their time to share with us their experiences of journeying with our Lord. We also want to say thank you to Rev and Mrs Hwa Jen for all the hard work of editing.

Shalom,
Rev Yong Wai Yin
Chairperson
Board of Worship and Music, TRAC

LOW IN THE GRAVE HE LAY

*LOW IN THE GRAVE HE LAY, JESUS MY SAVIOUR,
WAITING THE COMING DAY, JESUS MY LORD!*

REFRAIN

*UP FROM THE GRAVE HE AROSE,
WITH A MIGHTY TRIUMPH O'ER HIS FOES,
HE AROSE A VICTOR FROM THE DARK DOMAIN,
AND HE LIVES FOREVER, WITH HIS SAINTS TO REIGN.
HE AROSE! HE AROSE! HALLELUJAH! CHRIST AROSE!*

*YAIMLY THEY WATCH HIS BED, JESUS MY SAVIOUR;
YAIMLY THEY SEAL THE DEAD, JESUS MY LORD!*

*DEATH CANNOT KEEP HIS PREY, JESUS MY SAVIOUR;
HE TORE THE BARS AWAY, JESUS MY LORD!*

WORDS & MUSIC: ROBERT LOWRY, 1874

Bible Reading: 1 Corinthians 15

I grew up in Taiping and went to Sunday School, youth fellowship and church services at the Wesley Methodist Church. There, I had my early groundings in the Christian faith. There too, I learnt many of the hymns of faith, either singing with the congregation, Methodist Hymnal in hand, or in the choir being honed by Dr. Hansen. There were countless other good memories too and one of them would certainly be the Easter Sunrise Service.

Just about six in the morning, before the sun rose and while it was still dark, my friend Oliver would be at the gate of my house, ringing his bicycle bell and calling out to me in muted tones. Together we would cycle in the chill of the dawn - the road lighted by our bicycle lamps, the sound of dynamos grating against the back wheel, and the wind blowing against our faces. Life in the town would just be stirring as we made our way to the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery – flanked by the beautiful and scenic Lake Gardens on one side and the Maxwell Hills looming in the shadows on the other.

Through wide-open iron gates we would enter and walk down the centre, an aisle carpeted by well-trimmed grass, wet with the night's dew. We would all gather at the front, and stand before this white cross, standing tall yet alone and silhouetted brilliantly against the dark.

The service would begin with the pastor proclaiming, "Christ is risen!" and we would all echo "He is risen indeed!" and then exchange greetings with one another. Songs and prayers would follow, and then a message about the Risen Christ by the Pastor. In closing, we would always sing this victorious hymn of praise.

The voices in acapella would begin slowly, low and soft...*Low in the grave He lay, Jesus my Saviour, waiting the coming day, Jesus my Lord.*" When we reached the refrain, the voices would suddenly uncoil like tightly wound springs...*Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o'er His foes...*Higher we would go and louder we would sing, finally exploding in a shout...*He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!* Three times, we would declare this.

As the chorus rose, the dark would shrink away and the sun would rise – to shine, brilliant and warm. Wow! It never failed to move us, lift us!

The glorious Good News is this - Christ came, Christ died, and Christ rose again, according to the Scriptures. How deep the Father's love for us – while we yet sinners, Christ died for us. In Him, we have forgiveness of our sins, we have passed from death to life. We are reconciled to God and to one another. We are sons and daughters of the heavenly Father, sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit! In Him, we have life anew, life abundant and life eternal!

Yes, we are Good Friday people. But more than that, we are Easter people; once dead, but now alive, in Christ! Thanks be to God for His wonderful and marvellous grace. "Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor so that we through His poverty, might become rich."

To Listen to the Hymn, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9sSW8XN0vw&feature=related>

Further reading: Amos 5:6-15; Heb. 12:1-14; Luke 18:9-14

ACCOMPANYING GOD

"At daybreak, Jesus withdrew to a solitary place." Luke 4:42

Bible Reading: Luke 4:38-44

One day, Gandhi ran to catch a train. As he clambered aboard the last coach, he lost a slipper on the platform. The train was gathering speed. If you were Gandhi, what would you do?

Would you retrieve the slipper and risk being left behind? Would you resign yourself to getting another pair? Ordinary life is full of such dilemmas. What we choose to do reveals a great deal about our priorities and our ability to act on them.

So what did Gandhi do? He threw his other slipper onto the platform.

Gandhi made a spontaneous gesture that revealed his lifelong decision to prioritize generosity and service toward others.

Likewise Jesus. When surrounded by crowds, when hemmed in by the sick pleading for His healing power, Jesus knew what mattered most in His earthly ministry as the Incarnate Son. What mattered most was not healing people, meeting needs, teaching, preaching, mentoring or even seeking justice (even though all these things *did* matter to Jesus). What mattered *most* for Jesus was His relationship with the Father.

So even when the crowds and disciples were actively seeking Him out, Jesus withdrew. He looked for a solitary place to be with the Father in prayer (Luke 4:42) so He could serve God's people more effectively.

This seemingly spontaneous decision revealed how Jesus prioritized private prayer as part of public ministry. Jesus, the perfect human being, knew He needed the Father's company. Do you?

Over to you

Currently, where is a solitary place where you can withdraw to be with God? Ask for God's help to increase your desire to keep company with Jesus in daily life.

Further reading: Hab. 3:1-18; Phil. 3:12-21; John 17:1-8

PRAYER TO OBTAIN DIVINE LOVE¹

LORD, I PRAY YOU, THAT THE BURNING AND BRIGHT ARDOUR OF YOUR LOVE MAY DETACK MY SOUL FROM ALL THINGS WHICH ARE UNDER HEAVEN, SO THAT I MAY DIE FOR THE LOVE OF YOUR LOVE. FOR YOU ARE THE ONE WHO FOR LOVE OF MY LOVE WAS PREPARED TO DIE.

~ *St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)*

🕯 **Devotional commentary:**

St. Francis of Assisi, who lived a life of simplicity and love, was born into a wealthy family. But one day, he literally stripped off his costly garments, gave them back to his father, and assumed the lifestyle of a beggar. Renouncing all worldly attachments, Francis found true freedom in emulating the self-emptying God in the incarnation of Jesus (Phil. 2:5-7). For him, to love God was also to love His creation, as depicted in his famous work, *The Canticle of the Sun*. We, however, given our acquisitive nature in this age of consumerism, have exploited earth's resources and have become slaves to materialism. Unlike Francis, we lack his all-consuming passion to die for the love of God's love (Rev. 12:11).

😊 **Over to You:**

Unless we are able to perceive the poverty of our souls in the midst of much materialism, our sensibilities would be overwhelmed by the cravings of our sinful nature, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Francis' call to simplicity of life and humility before God challenges us to re-examine our attitudes toward repentance to Jesus who for the love of our love was prepared to die. How are we to be good stewards of God's gracious gifts of life and Creation in view of current global ecological crises?

✝ **Prayer**

Lord, deliver me from the clutches of my needs and wants. Reveal to me what holds me back from pursuing You passionately. Grant me the freedom of simplicity, desiring only to have Your love. Humbly I ask this of You.

Further reading: Ezek. 18:1-4, 25-32; Phil. 4:1-9; John 17:9-19

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Bible Reading: Matthew 6: 5-15

Are you weary of praying?
Do you feel that your prayers are ineffective?
Do you sometimes wonder if God is listening?
Or, worse, do you feel like giving up?

Prayerless people cut themselves off from God's prevailing power. The result is the familiar feeling of being overwhelmed, overrun, beaten down, pushed down. Prayer is one of the avenues that God uses to transform us: To pray is to allow God to change us.

At the heart of Jesus' own life were the times when He withdrew from the crowds in order to be alone with His Father. He also wanted His disciples to enter into that same experience of knowing God as Father. So the prayer He taught them starts this way: 'Our Father...'. Knowing God as our Father includes bringing to Him our personal and intimate needs and longings. Each of us can think of God as 'my Father'.

The Lord's Prayer is an expression of faith, not only in what it says, but also in what it assumes. The assumption is that we, human beings, are not self-sufficient. It is not a sign of weakness to pray but, rather, a sign of genuine humanity. Prayer is not merely for emergencies, but also for thankful praise that acknowledges our true dependence on God.

Thank God that the Lord's Prayer belongs to the whole Church and not to any one denomination. It is His gift to all of us and it is shared by all of us. To pray 'Our Father' helps to remind us that we belong to one another as the people of God.

Reflection

Read the Lord's Prayer slowly and reflect on its importance in your daily life. Determine to make use of it more frequently throughout the day.

Further reading: Ezek. 39:21-29; Phil. 4:10-20; John 17:20-26

NO ONE EVER CARED FOR ME LIKE JESUS

*I WOULD LOVE TO TELL YOU WHAT I THINK OF JESUS
SINCE I FOUND IN HIM A FRIEND SO STRONG AND TRUE;
I WOULD TELL YOU HOW HE CHANGED MY LIFE COMPLETELY,
HE DID SOMETHING THAT NO OTHER FRIEND COULD DO.*

CHORUS:

*No one ever cared for me like Jesus;
There's no other friend so kind as He;
No one else could take the sin and darkness from me,
O how much He cared for me!*

*ALL MY LIFE WAS FULL OF SIN WHEN JESUS FOUND ME;
ALL MY HEART WAS FULL OF MISERY AND WOE;
JESUS PLACED HIS STRONG AND LOVING ARMS AROUND ME,
AND HE LED ME IN THE WAY I OUGHT TO GO.*

*Ev'ry day He comes to me with new assurance,
More and more I understand His words of love;
But I'll never know just why He came to save me,
Till some day I see His blessed face above.*

Bible Reading: John 15:12-17

Sometime in 1966, the Rev. Dr. Sam Kamaleson came to Taiping. We were told that he was a well-known Christian gospel preacher and singer from Madras. So one night, my friends and I went and sat ourselves down in the Treacher Methodist Girls' School hall to hear what he had to say.

I don't remember what he said that night but I certainly remember what he sang; his deep baritone voice singing every word clearly and deliberately. "I would love to tell you what I think of Jesus since I found in Him a friend so strong and true; I would tell you how he changed my life completely, He did something that no other friend could ... No one ever cared for me like Jesus."

It was the first time I had heard this song, but it struck a chord with me immediately. I don't remember if I cried, but I know something stirred deep within my heart as he sang. It seemed to resonate with a deeper longing within. It wasn't as if I had done terribly bad things, although I knew I was a sinner in God's eyes. It wasn't as if I didn't have a loving family and good friends. I did! Problems I had, but it wasn't as if I had experienced any major tragic circumstances.

Yet as he sang, I was moved. And I knew that I wanted this Jesus to be my Friend – a Friend so strong and true, a Friend who could forgive me my sins and lead me in the way I ought to go, and a Friend who would love me and come to me each new day with His reassuring love. And by the end of the meeting, I found myself walking up to the front of the hall to be prayed for.

Since that day, He's been my Friend. We've gone through many rough patches, but also sailed with the winds many times. Yes, "*No one 'has' ever cared for me like Jesus*" – a Friend ever-forgiving, daily-guiding and superglue-faithful.

To Listen to Paula Orr sing the song, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5N6Y8mnXZRE&feature=related>

The Story behind the Song

Charles Weigle (1871-1966) was a travelling evangelist and gospel songwriter. After a series of gospel meetings, he returned home one day to find a note left by his wife of many years. It simply said she had had enough of an evangelist's life and was leaving him.

He became so despondent that there were times when he even contemplated suicide. He thought no one cared for him. But after a time, his faith in and work for the Lord was restored and renewed. Out of the darkest period of his life came his most famous song, *No One Ever Cared for Me Like Jesus* – a summary of his tragic experience. From a heart that had been broken came these words that God gave to comfort him.

Further reading: Gen. 37:1-11; 1 Cor. 1:1-19; Mark 1:1-13

HOLY ORDINARY

"My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work." JOHN 4:34

Bible Reading: John 4:27-34

We go to church to worship God and to nourish our souls with the preaching and fellowship. But do we see our ordinary life -- work, conversations, meetings, chores, raising children -- as a source of spiritual growth and nourishment?

Jesus found his spiritual nourishment from a noonday conversation with a woman by a well. (In contrast, His disciples saw that act as mundane and insignificant.) Jesus saw that conversation -- a simple act of asking for a drink -- as doing the will of God. Jesus saw the holy in the ordinary. Because of Jesus' extraordinary vision of what God was doing, Jesus' words and actions transformed the lives of people who met him, including the Samaritan woman who drew water for him.

"Whatever you eat or drink or *whatever you do*, you must do all for the glory of God," says Paul (1 Cor 10:31).

The smallest act can become holy when we do it for love of God. Conversely, church work and prayer becomes godless when it is done without loving obedience to God.

Ordinary life is a crazy mix of woe and wonder, sweat and sweetness, tears and joy. Jesus experienced all this. He lived an ordinary life. We cannot always wipe away the pain and the tears. But we can learn how to make these holy, just as Jesus did.

Over to you

What will you be doing in the next 24 hours? As you approach each event or moment, pray: "Help me, Lord, to notice what You are doing. Let me respond to Your slightest touch."

Further reading: Gen. 37:12-24; 1 Cor. 1:20-31; Mark 1:14-28

LOVE UNFOLDING²

"And I saw full surely in this and in everything that before ever God made us, he loved us. And this love was never quenched nor ever shall be. And in this love he has done all his works, and in this love he has made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting. In our making we had beginning, but the love in which he made us was in him from without beginning, in which love we have our beginning. And all this shall we see in God without end."

~ *Julian of Norwich (c.1342-1416)*

🕯 **Devotional commentary:**

Wow, God loves us even before he made us! Nothing, yes, nothing can change this truth. Love is God's only motivation for all He does. God has made all things in love, with love and for love. Julian saw her world through the lens of God's everlasting, enfolding love. Likewise, St. Paul was convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:37-39). Oh, how we need this faith vision of reality in our broken humanity, and to exchange our conditional love for the supreme unconditional love of God! This is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!

☺ **Over to you:**

Is this too good to be true? Tell the Lord Jesus how you feel. Let the Holy Spirit make real to you God's enfolding love which is without beginning, in which he made you, and in which you had your beginning. Dare to try him?

✝ **Prayer**

Almighty God and Father, such love is foreign to my human nature. My constant diet is that of conditional love, yet deep in my heart I yearn to be secure in Your everlasting love. Make that real for me today. I trust Your will, at Your good pleasure. Thank You!

Further reading: Gen. 37:25-36; 1 Cor. 2:1-13; Mark 1:29-45

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Bible Reading: Luke 23:26-43

The cross has been the most universal and significant symbol of the Christian faith throughout church history. There are about 400 different forms or designs – among them the familiar Latin cross, the Greek cross, the Budded Cross. Regardless of the design, the cross should always remind us of the price that God paid for humanity's redemption.

The cross of Christ can represent either a blessing or a curse,--depending on our response to it. This is illustrated by the two thieves who were crucified on either side of Jesus. As they were hanging there, one of them made fun of Jesus just as the Roman soldiers had done. He challenged Jesus, saying, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal reprimanded him. He reminded him that the punishment they received was the due reward for their misdeeds but Jesus had done nothing wrong. He believed that Jesus would come in power and glory in His kingdom.

Thus, one man turned to Jesus and received divine mercy while the other 'rebelled his way into hell'. God will neither violate a person's free will nor force His love on anyone. He will not reject anyone who cries out to Him in believing faith.

As we journey through life what does the cross mean for us? Here are some thoughts.

- i. The cross means sacrifice. It was costly and it involved death.
- ii. The cross means ransom. Jesus paid the price and that brought freedom.
- iii. The cross means reconciliation. It shows that humanity is no longer estranged from God.
- iv. The cross means justification. It shows that we have all been 'put in the right' with God.
- v. The cross means triumph. By his death Jesus passed beyond death and triumphed over the powers of evil.

Reflection:

Awaken your appreciation of Jesus' suffering and death at Calvary. Reflect on what Jesus has done and give thanks to God for saving you.

Further reading: Gen. 39:1-23; 1 Cor. 2:14-3:15; Mark 2:1-12

LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, HOPE OF THE WORLD

***LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, HOPE OF THE WORLD,
LORD OF THE LIMITLESS REACHES OF SPACE,
HERE ON THIS PLANET, YOU PUT ON OUR FLESH,
YOUNGNESS CONFINED IN THE WOMB OF A MAID,
BORN IN OUR LIKENESS YOU RANSOMED OUR RACE:***

REFRAIN:

***SAVIOUR, WE WORSHIP YOU, PRAISE AND ADORE
HELP US TO HONOUR YOU MORE AND YET MORE
HELP US TO HONOUR YOU MORE AND YET MORE.***

***LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, HOPE OF THE WORLD,
LORD OF THE INFINITE EONS OF TIME,
YOU CAME AMONG US, LIVED OUR BRIEF YEARS,
TASTED OUR GRIEFS, OUR ALONENESS, OUR FEARS,
CONQUERED OUR DEATH, MADE ETERNITY OURS:***

***LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, HOPE OF THE WORLD,
SEND OUT YOUR LIGHT TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH,
MAY WE WHO KNOW YOU OBEY YOUR COMMAND,
GO WITH THE GRACE OF YOUR GOSPEL TO ALL,
BRINGING SALVATION AND FREEDOM AND JOY:***

***LORD OF THE UNIVERSE, HOPE OF THE WORLD,
HOW YOUR CREATION CRIES OUT FOR RELEASE,
LOOKS FOR YOU, LONGS FOR YOU, WATCHES AND WAITS,
PRAYS FOR YOUR KINGDOM OF JUSTICE AND PEACE,
MAKER, REDEEMER, TRIUMPHANT ONE, COME!***

WORDS & MUSIC: MARGARET E CLARKSON

Bible Reading:

John 1:14; 1 Tim. 2:6; Heb. 4:14-16; Ps. 43:3; Rom. 8:18-25

Sometime in 1978, I took leave from work to return to Taiping. Came Sunday morning, I was promptly at my home church, the Wesley Methodist Church, to worship – an eagerness borne not of joyous faith then, but a simple habit, nagging nostalgia and the hope of meeting old friends.

Rev. Hwa Chien invited the people to stand, and as Siok Im began her notes on the piano, the faithful raised their voices and sang this song.

I love to sing and normally would, even for a new song like this. But this time, I did not. I just listened, caught up by the beautiful words and melody. The repeated refrain invited me to reverently worship yet it was uncomfortably disturbing – a call to confess Jesus as *Lord of the universe, hope of the world*, followed by a doxology of ‘worship, praise, adoration and honour’ to the Saviour.

It had been and still was a trying time for me – a year of struggle with physical, emotional and spiritual issues. My father had dropped dead suddenly in June 1977 and I was angry with God for whisking him away without even a chance for me to say ‘goodbye’ and ‘thank you’. My mother was in a lingering depression because of this and I was frustrated that I was of no help to her. Work as a 1st year medical doctor was interesting and challenging, but physically draining. And the joy of the Lord had somehow disappeared from my life! Going home then would be a good break for me, or so I thought.

And I did not expect to be confronted with this... Truth be told, I could not sing because I could not confess that Jesus was Lord of my ‘universe’, and hope of my life! At that point in my life, I was challenged and found wanting.

But I liked the hymn. After the service, I got a copy of the lyrics and music and took it back with me to KL. And time and time again, I revisited it. But it was to be a while more before body, mind and spirit could agree and birth this new song on my lips – confessing that Jesus is Lord of my ‘listless’ life and hope of my ‘washed-up’ world and then bowing, albeit stutteringly, in worship to my Saviour!

Note: The four stanzas start with the theme phrase *Lord of the universe, hope of the world*. Stanza 1 recalls Christ's incarnation and stanza 2, his earthly ministry; stanza 3 enjoins us to be serious about our missionary task; stanza 4 looks forward to Christ's coming again. The refrain turns this hymn of confession into an anthem of praise.

Further reading: Gen. 40:1-23; 1 Cor. 3:16-23; Mark 2:13-22

WELCOMING GOD

"Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me." Luke 9:46

Bible Reading: Luke 9:46-48

God reveals his presence when we do great things for Him. God is closest during mission trips, all-night prayer vigils, evangelistic rallies and worship events in stadiums. That's what I used to think. That's what the disciples thought too, as they argued about who among them should be the greatest. Not Jesus.

"Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me," says Jesus. Luke, the author of the gospel, observed that Jesus *brought* the little child to his side. The Son of God had sought out this child!

Are you seeking God? Jesus promises us His presence when we welcome a little child in Jesus' name. It's as simple as that.

I'm a first-time father. Before baby Andrew entered my life, I never carried a little child. So, for many years, I unknowingly deprived myself of the opportunity to welcome God in my life. Parenting and childcare are not the only pathways to God. Jesus seems to be telling us that any facet of life can be a potent pathway for spiritual growth and transformation -- as long as we are consciously welcome God and people in our lives.

Often, we tell ourselves: "We must try to pray. We must try to do quiet time. We must try to put God in our lives." But Anthony de Mello, a well-loved spiritual director, observes that "God is already there. Our business is to recognize this."

Over to you

Consider the events and people in your life in the coming 24 hours. These may include:

= driving to work	= meetings	= lunch
= friendships	= conversations	= house chores
= homework	= marriage	= parenting
= exercise		

In your prayer, welcome the Lord Jesus into these specific events.

Further reading: Gen. 41:1-13; 1 Cor. 4:1-7; Mark 2:23-3:6

LOVE WAS OUR LORD'S MEANING³

"AND FROM THAT TIME THAT IT WAS SHOWN, I DESIRED OFTEN TO KNOW WHAT WAS OUR LORD'S MEANING. AND FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER AND MORE, I WAS ANSWERED IN SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING, SAYING, 'WOULD YOU KNOW YOUR LORD'S MEANING IN THIS? LEARN IT WELL. LOVE WAS HIS MEANING. WHO SHOWED IT TO YOU? LOVE. WHAT DID HE SHOW YOU? LOVE. WHY DID HE SHOW YOU? FOR LOVE. HOLD FAST TO THIS, AND YOU SHALL LEARN AND KNOW MORE ABOUT LOVE, BUT YOU WILL NEVER NEED TO KNOW OR UNDERSTAND ANYTHING ELSE FOR EVER AND EVER.' THUS DID I LEARN THAT LOVE WAS OUR LORD'S MEANING."

~ Julian of Norwich (c.1342-1416)

🕯 **Devotional commentary:**

Love is the only motivation in all that God does. This conviction which helped Julian to weather the storms in her life came to her not by natural means but through visions and mystical experiences which she recorded in her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*. We find its echo in John 3:16 and Romans 8:32-39. When faced with evil, suffering or pain, we search for answers to our 'whys'. And when God remains strangely silent (for He owes us no explanations!), dark thoughts and doubt assail us. Yet, indeed, what kind of God would send His only Son to die on the Cross to save us? What kind of love is this?

🕯 **Over to You:**

How do you normally respond to disappointments or difficulties? Do you believe that '*Love is the Lord's meaning*' in your life'? What are the events in your life that challenge Love as the Lord's meaning for you? Our Lord waits for you to get real, to talk with Him, and be honest with Him. Ponder on His love.

✠ **Prayer:**

Make real to me, O Holy Spirit, what my human mind cannot conceive – that Love is the Lord's meaning in my life. Grant that I may anchor my life deeply in Your enfolding Love as a pilgrim on transit in this world.

Further reading: Gen. 41:46-57; 1 Cor. 4:8-21; Mark 3:7-19a

GOD OUR LOVING FATHER

Bible Reading: Luke 15:11-32

As I was putting my daughter to sleep, she turned around and hugged me and said, "Papa, I love you." Now that beats anything. Imagine my feelings as a father.

One of the most wonderful revelations in the Bible is that God is our Father who loves us. Jesus was constantly in touch with His Father throughout His ministry on this earth. The Parable of the Prodigal Son paints a wonderful picture of a loving Father. There are three aspects of the character of this father that help us understand the father heart of God.

i. He loved his son enough to let him leave home.

In the Jewish tradition, a father has the responsibility of teaching his children the laws of God. (Dt. 6:4-8) He would prepare his sons to be responsible members of the Jewish community. Now in this parable, the younger son chose to go his own way. That his father responded lovingly still to this rebellious son shows precisely the heart of God.

ii. He loved his son so deeply that he watched for his return.

Every day this father must have kept a lookout for his son, longing for him to come home. How great is his patience and compassion! It is the son's desperate need and the remembrance of his father's kindness that finally cause him to go home, and then he finds his father's love again.

iii. He loved his son so much that when he returned home, he did not condemn his son but forgave him.

We notice that he is not only a waiting Father but a 'running father'. He embraces his long lost son. He is totally forgiving. His action says it all. This is the manner that the heavenly Father loves us, and He calls us sons and daughters (1 John 3:1). It grieves Him when we sin against Him or when we hurt others. He weeps for us and waits for us to repent.

Reflection:

1. One attribute of God that not even the best parent can hope to imitate is God's ability to be with us all the time. Think about this.
2. Are people reminded of your Father God as they get acquainted with you? Do others see Jesus in you?

Further reading: Gen. 42:1-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-8; Mark 3:19b-35

PRAISE MY SOUL, THE KING OF HEAVEN

*Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
to His feet thy tribute bring;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
evermore His praises sing:
Alleluia, alleluia!
Praise the everlasting King.*

*Praise Him for His grace and favour
to our fathers in distress;
praise Him still the same for ever,
slow to chide and swift to bless:
Alleluia, alleluia!
Glorious in His faithfulness.*

*Father-like, He tends and spares us;
well our feeble frame He knows;
mother-like He gently bears us,
rescues us from all our foes.
Alleluia, alleluia!
Widely yet His mercy flows.*

*Words: Henry Francis Lyte, 1834
Music: John Goss*

Bible Reading: Psalm 103

My wife and I left KL and arrived in London in August 1981 to continue our postgraduate studies – she in Paediatrics and I in Cardiology. Despite having each other for company, it was still a relatively tough time for us.

We arrived in the warmth of summer, but the cold and drab of winter would soon hit us. Unlike our thunderstorm bursts in Malaysia, the rain could irritatingly pitter-patter the whole day long. Windows were shut all the time, and yet the pesky draft would somehow chill into our old single bedroom apartment. Days were short and we often went to work in the dark and returned in the dark, never to see the sun the whole day!

That first winter, I came down with such a bad respiratory tract infection that I lost my voice for the first time!

The cultural environment was different too. The spoken English was different and ‘misunderstandings’ were common, fortunately none of them serious. And now my wife had a ‘three-way split personality’ just because she didn’t have an English name. They couldn’t decide if she was “Wu” or “Loo” or “Ling.”

We were on a shoestring budget so finances had to be managed wisely. And pursuing postgraduate training meant the added strain of studying and passing exams.

London was just not home!

At times, it was quite frustrating. We also had no idea where to worship, and so hopped around for a bit. It didn’t help that we didn’t have a Christian community to belong to, and to be a part of. As I was a fan of John Stott’s writings, one Sunday we took the Tube to Oxford Circus and walked to All Souls (Church) Langham Place to hear him preach.

There, we heard and sang this song for the first time. With the pipe organ in accompaniment, the music was truly majestic and we seemed to soar to the heavens each time we declared *Alleluia, alleluia!* Downcast, we were reminded that *father-like He tends and spares us, well our feeble frame He knows; mother-like He gently bears us...widely yet His mercy flows.*”

God knew our situation. We need not mope. We were reminded that God had come with *His grace and favour to our fathers in distress*. He is *still the same for ever ... glorious in His faithfulness*. Instead of looking inwards and downwards, we were challenged to look upwards – in worship and praise, which is the rightful tribute to our God-King.

Reminded, re-affirmed and renewed, we came away from Sunday worship that day, not just feeling better, but resolved to live better – at peace and contented with the Lord and ourselves – for the rest of our stay in the UK. *Alleluia, alleluia! Praise the everlasting King.*

To Listen to the Hymn, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=az3F5Q0QDk8> or

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx1eMwIDFb8>

Further reading: Gen. 42:18-28; 1 Cor. 5:9-6:8; Mark 4:1-20

GOING DEEP

“Launch out in the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” Luke 5:4

Bible Reading: Luke 5:1-11

Ever felt stuck doing unproductive work? In Luke 5, the disciples fished all night but caught nothing. The next morning, Jesus, a woodworker, told the veteran fishermen to fish in deeper waters. The skeptical men caught so much fish their boats nearly sank. Overwhelmed by God's generosity, they did not continue fishing for more and more. They launched out, leaving behind their security nets. They followed Jesus.

We fear the unknown. We fear giving up financial or emotional security, power or status, simple comforts or the company of friends and family. But if we truly want to break free from the cycle of unproductive or meaningless work, there must be some kind of letting go -- in order to launch out with God.

It's possible to spend the rest of our lives dipping our toes in the wading pool instead of going deep-sea fishing. To such people, spiritual director Anthony de Mello writes: "People who deliberate fully before they take a step will spend their lives on one leg."

Over to you

Although the disciples followed Jesus, they never sold their boats and nets. Instead the boats became vehicles for Kingdom blessing. Jesus loved His disciples' boats. Jesus traveled, preached and took naps in their boats. When we surrender our most precious things to God, we don't lose them. They simply become available for God to use and enjoy as He wishes. What do you desire to surrender for God's pleasure?

Close your eyes. Jesus says: "(YOUR NAME), launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." Let Him speak to the depths of your heart. Where is He calling you to launch out?

Further reading: Gen. 42:29-38; 1 Cor. 6:12-30; Mark 4:21-34

ALL SHALL BE WELL⁴

“Because of our good Lord’s tender love to all those who shall be saved, He quickly comforts them, saying, ‘The cause of all this pain is sin. But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.’ These words were said so kindly and without a hint of blame to me or to any who shall be saved. So how unjust it would be for me to blame God for allowing my sin when He does not blame me for falling into it.”

~ Julian of Norwich (c.1342-1416)

☪ **Devotional commentary:**

Julian, an English mystic, lived in a time of turmoil when the Black Death and peasant revolts evoked a popular belief that God was punishing the wicked. Similarly, today, the 2004 tsunami, the H1N1 pandemic, and other natural disasters have also been attributed as God’s judgment on our world. However, Julian’s firm conviction was in the merciful God of compassion and love. So, in times of crises, we too need to hold on firmly to the belief that *“the cause of all this pain is sin. But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”* Such an affirmation of faith comforts and strengthens us – that our sovereign, all-loving and all-merciful God will work out all things for the good of those who love Him, so that we may be conformed to the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:28-29). This, then, is our hope!

☺ **Over to You:**

Whatever your particular circumstances of life may be, God knows. Whatever your reactions to these circumstances have been, God also knows. Our good Lord not only knows, He also understands. In tender love, He wants to comfort you ‘without a hint of blame’ to you. Would you let God love you or would you blame Him?

✠ **Prayer**

Gracious, loving Father, I believe that in Your love, all shall be well because You can turn all my pain and sorrows into blessings. Let Your tenderness melt away all my bitterness, and restore to me the joy of Your salvation for the good of all!

Further reading: Gen. 43:1-15; 1 Cor. 7:1-9; Mark 4:35-41

COMPASSION

Bible Reading: Luke 10:25-37

As Jesus approached the climax of His earthly ministry, the scribes and Pharisees developed great hostility toward Him. They found His teachings of love for all people contradictory to their customs and tradition. They resented Him. They plotted His downfall.

Once, a member of this group, an expert in the law of Moses stood up to ask Jesus, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). The lawyer was testing Him. Jesus answered the lawyer’s question with one of His own -- now a challenge to the lawyer’s integrity: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The lawyer knew the answer but that was not enough. Eternal life is found not just in knowing the commandments but in doing them.

Jesus continued to illustrate His point by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus’ purpose in relating this parable was not just to tell a clever story. In Luke 10:30-35, Jesus revealed three attitudes that people have towards possessions.

- The robbers: “What is yours is mine, and I will take it.
- The priest and the Levite: “What is mine is mine, and I will keep it.”
- But the Good Samaritan: “What is mine is yours, and I will share it.”

Jesus’ question revealed the lawyer’s true intentions. He got nothing out of Jesus that he did not already know. But Jesus challenged him to do as the Good Samaritan had done.

Reflection:

You cannot will yourself to do the right thing by merely saying, “I will do as the Good Samaritan did.” However if you allow the love of God to come into your heart, His love will prompt you to meet the needs of those whom God will place in your pathway of life.

Further reading: Gen. 43:16-34; 1 Cor. 7:10-24; Mark 5:1-20

O LOVE THAT WILT NOT LET ME GO

*O LOVE THAT WILT NOT LET ME GO,
I REST MY WEARY SOUL IN THEE;
I GIVE THEE BACK THE LIFE I OWE,
THAT IN THE OCEAN DEPTHS ITS FLOW
MAY RICHER, FULLER BE.*

*O LIGHT THAT FOLLOWEST ALL MY WAY,
I YIELD MY FLICKERING TORCH TO THEE;
MY HEART RESTORES ITS BORROWED RAY,
THAT IN THY SUNSHINE'S BLAZE ITS DAY
MAY BRIGHTER, FAIRER BE.*

*O JOY THAT SEEKEST ME THROUGH PAIN,
I CANNOT CLOSE MY HEART TO THEE;
I TRACE THE RAINBOW THROUGH THE RAIN,
AND FEEL THE PROMISE IS NOT VAIN,
THAT MORN SHALL FEARLESS BE.*

*O CROSS THAT LIFTEST UP MY HEAD,
I DARE NOT ASK TO FLY FROM THEE;
I LAY IN DUST LIFE'S GLORY DEAD,
AND FROM THE GROUND THERE BLOSSOMS RED
LIFE THAT SHALL ENDLESS BE.*

WORDS: GEORGE MATHESON, 1882

MUSIC: ALBERT L. PEACE, 1884

Bible Reading: Isaiah 54:1-10

It was January 2001 and I was attending my first TRAC Executive Board Retreat in Fraser's Hill. I was a raw rookie at Conference level work, having just been elected Conference Associate Lay Leader in November 2000. As the new kid on the block, I felt a sense of dislocation. I wasn't quite sure what to expect and also what was expected of me, not just at this Retreat but also in TRAC in the years ahead.

It was the first morning after we arrived. I don't remember who led the devotions, but I do remember the song we sang, "O Love that wilt not let me go." I don't even remember when I learnt the hymn. (I usually do.) But when we began to sing, the words and tune flowed out effortlessly in harmony, as if imprisoned for ages and now basking in its freedom.

I had been active in "Christian" work since my student days. And for many years now, I have been serving in leadership and in various ministries in a new church we had founded. Secure, contented and nicely tucked away, I hadn't thought much about TRAC as a connection of faith-communities, nor even serving in TRAC at Conference level. But God had other ideas. He stepped in through His servant, Rev. Hwa Chien.

As we sang, my tears flowed. I don't really know why but these must have been tears from the soul, provoked by the Spirit of God.

Perhaps God was reminding me that He had set His hand and His eyes on me long ago, and that He wasn't going to let me go.

Perhaps 'the Hound of Heaven' was now reeling me in and challenging me to "give Him back the life I owe", "to yield my flickering torch to Him" and "not to close my heart to Him."

Perhaps I was uncertain, anxious, and afraid? He reassured me of His "Love that will not let go," His "Light that will follow all my way," His "Joy that will seek me through pain" and His "Cross that will lift up my head."

Perhaps I was still reluctant and unwilling? And He was underlining yet again that only in His ocean depths will my life's flow be richer and fuller; that only in dying to myself, will from the ground blossom afresh life that shall endless be.

Confronted yet re-affirmed by the Spirit-inspired words, I came away from the Retreat with a clearer sense of where I was and what He wanted me to do. I came away knowing that at this time, this was where He wanted me to be. And I came away surrendering to the "love that will never let me go".

To Listen to the Song by The Gaither Vocal Band:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sykrVzp2vPg&feature=related>

Further reading: Gen. 44:18-34; 1 Cor. 7:25-31; Mark 5:21-43

ENTHUSIASTIC WORK

***"How is it that you are standing here, and have done nothing all the day?"
Matt. 20:6***

Bible Reading: Matthew 20:1-7

God cares about work. God cares about how you work.

Theologian Cardinal Wyszynski writes: "The greatness of our life in furthering God's plans does not depend on what we do, on what form our activity takes, but on how we perform our tasks."

In the parable of the labourers, the master wants to know why the people are idling by the wayside. God is deeply concerned when we feel we are doing nothing.

This also applies to those of us working very long hours. Why? Because inwardly, many of us may feel that our work brings little value to God. Like the labourers, we feel as if God has not yet appointed us to our *real* work. So it's possible to end up doing nothing all the day even when we're working like crazy.

Once, a woman complained to spiritual director Anthony de Mello that riches hadn't made her happy. De Mello replied: "You speak as if luxury and comfort were ingredients of happiness; whereas all you need to be really happy, my dear, is something to be enthusiastic about."

Over to you

Do you feel you are doing nothing for God in your work because...

= you are working too hard? Ask God to reveal areas in your life you may be neglecting due to overwork.

= you wish you could be doing "Christian ministry"? Repent for working half-heartedly. Ask God to reveal His calling in your life.

= your job is killing your soul? Pray for courage to see things as they really are. Trust God radically now.

= your work has strangled your prayer life? Ask God to help you see private prayer as essential work.

Further reading: Gen. 45:1-15; 1 Cor. 7:32-40; Mark 6:1-13

THE GENTLE MIRROR OF GOD'S GOODNESS⁵

"As the soul comes to know herself she also knows God better, for she sees how good He has been to her. In the gentle mirror of God she sees her own dignity: that through no merit of hers but by His creation she is the image of God. And in the mirror of God's goodness she sees as well her own unworthiness, the work of her own sin. For just as you can better see the blemish on your face when you look at yourself in a mirror, so the soul who in true self-knowledge rises up with desire to look at herself in the gentle mirror of God with the eye of understanding sees all the more clearly her own defects because of the purity she sees in Him."

~ Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

🕯 Devotional commentary:

A healthy knowledge of oneself and of God is fundamental to a relationship with God. Faulty knowledge of either or both has resulted in our inability to relate with God, and to believe that God truly loves us. For Catherine of Siena, knowing oneself is intimately related with knowing God. True self-knowledge in *the gentle mirror of God's goodness*, not only lets us see our own dignity with gratitude, but also our own sinfulness with humility. Only the truth of this dual knowledge can deliver us from narcissistic individualism and narcotic religiosity to become our true self in Christ as God's beloved children.

☺ Over to You:

The mirrors of the world – family, ethnic culture, work or society – would only allow you to see yourself dimly with its distortion. In which mirror have you been seeing yourself? How has that affected your relationship with God? You might like to talk with God about what you have seen, and listen for God's response to you.

✝ Prayer

"By the grace of God, I am what I am and His grace toward me is not in vain." (1 Cor. 15:10) This is my desire, dear Lord, and thank You for creating and restoring Your likeness in me.

Further reading: Gen. 45:16-28; 1 Cor. 8:1-13; Mark 6:13-29

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

Bible Reading Matthew 16: 1-15

First asked by an obscure Galilean many years ago, this searching question “Who do you say that I am?” is still perhaps the most important one we must answer today. What do you think of Christ? What we think determines what we do and who we are. Our ideas about industry, wealth, morals, family, and religion will mould society and affect lives. What we think of Jesus still makes all the difference in the world today.

In Matthew 16:14, the disciples told Jesus what other people were saying about Him. The answers then were as varied as they are now. All agreed that Jesus was an extraordinary person,—at least a prophet or a person who had supernatural powers. The people thought highly of Jesus.

But Jesus then turned the general question into a specific one: “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” This is not only an important question but to each of us it is a very personal question.

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” exclaimed the impulsive and fervent Peter. He understood Jesus Christ to be the Messiah, the fulfilment of the prophecies of the old Hebrew prophets. This confession is significant because it exalts Christ as the Son of God, lifts Him above all humanity and crowns Him with divinity.

Jesus then told Peter and the disciples concerning who He was: “on this rock I will build my church.” (Matthew 16:18) That was what Jesus was going to do—build a Church of which He Himself would be the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). This Church was born on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

Jesus knew His path led to Jerusalem, that He would be handed to the priests and Pharisees and then nailed to the fateful cross. But Jesus did not reveal these things until His disciples were ready to bear it. God often in His mercy hides the future from us.

Reflection:

Jesus still asks this question: “Who do you say I am?” Who is Christ to you?

Further reading: Gen. 46:1-7, 28-34; 1 Cor. 9:1-15; Mark 6:30-46

O GOD OUR HELP IN AGES PAST

*O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.*

*Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.*

*Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.*

*A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.*

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.*

*O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guide while life shall last,
And our eternal home.*

*LYRICS: Isaac Watts (1674-1748)
MUSIC: WILLIAM CROFT (1678-1727)*

Bible Reading: Psalm 90

To listen to the Hymn sung, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asrwIIXLeko>

I love Thursday mornings. I always looked forward to them as I didn't have to go in to work till the afternoon. I could then have an extended time of prayer and Bible reading, or else catch up with some work. But one Thursday, as I sat alone in my bedroom, my heart was troubled. My shoulders sagged with the struggles of people around me.

- A young man who was dumped by his girlfriend ranted and raved against God shamelessly. "God saw it coming and did nothing about it!" He even wanted to "spear God and sell his soul to the devil" if he could!

- A college student, so anguished by his family problems, inadequate language skills and poor academic results, confessed, "I don't find joy in going to church anymore. I am in conflict. Am I still a Christian?"

- A married couple, stung by the bombshell of the husband's infidelity, now had to deal with the rumbling aftershocks. Trust betrayed, emotions like a 'roller-coaster', depression gnawing at body, mind and spirit.

- Two friends undergoing surgical biopsies, walking in the shadow of the big "C" (cancer). "Will it be? What if it is?" Uncertainties, anxieties, and faith challenged yet again.

- A church divided over further development, friends viewing one another with suspicion, pastor and parishioners at odds with one another, Christian fellowship and unity broken. Can't we sit and talk, kneel together, hold hands and pray? Can't we *with all humility, gentleness and patience, bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?* (Eph. 4:2-3) How sad our Three-in-One God must be to see His children 'quarrelling' yet again.

I bowed, not in reverence but heaviness and my eyes misted. My friends' struggles ding-donged in my mind, even as I wondered, "How can I help? What can I do?" And the Spirit of God, in tandem with the sighs of my spirit, prompted me with the words of this hymn. God knows. God cares. He has helped before and He will help again and yet again. God will be sufficient for all our needs. He is our hope, our shelter. God is our secure home, always!

As I prayed in song, the weight of the burden lightened. I was reassured. The Lord himself will take on the burdens of his children, the sons and daughters whom He loves. He will do what is right and good in His eyes, in His time.

Further reading: Gen. 46:1-7, 28-34; 1 Cor. 9:1-15; Mark 6:30-46

SMALL THINGS

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things."

Matt. 25:21

Bible Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

At work, we get stressed, anxious and frazzled. The dark side of our personality often surfaces while we work. We become angry, nurse grievances, stew in resentment. Even on good days, the daily blizzard of emails and meetings leave us totally distracted from God. Work hinders spiritual growth.

That's what I used to think.

But that's not how Jesus thinks about work. In God's perspective, work is a divine gift for sanctifying disciples. Our daily work offers us significant and unique opportunities to become like Jesus Christ. When we work in cooperation with God, our effort yields an internal, spiritual harvest that mysteriously endures for eternity (see John 4:36).

In this manner, the first two servants worked (Matt. 25:14-21). They believed their difficult and dangerous work in town was something "entrusted" to them by their Master. So they worked diligently. No task was too small. They boldly multiplied the master's investments in a hostile marketplace. As a result, their work shaped them into "good and faithful" people. In contrast, the third servant found his task and his master repulsive. His decision not to work turned him into a "wicked and lazy" person.

There is a correlation between goodness and the willingness to be faithful in small things. Theologian Cardinal Wyszyński writes: "Tiny and insignificant achievements can make us great, while great ones, if they are badly performed, can degrade us."

Over to you

= Reflect on your next 24 hours. In what ways is God giving you opportunities to be faithful with a few things? Give thanks to the Lord for these coming opportunities that will shape you in goodness and faithfulness.

Further reading: Gen. 47:27-48:7; 1 Cor. 10:1-13; Mark 7:1-23

GOD LOVES US WITHOUT BEING LOVED
& WITHOUT ANY SELF-INTEREST⁶

"You must love with the same pure love with which I love you. But you cannot do this for me because I love you without being loved and without any self-interest. And because I loved you without being loved by you, even before you existed (in fact it was love that moved Me to create you in My own image and likeness) you cannot repay Me. But you must give this love to other people, loving them without being loved by them. You must love them without any concern for your own spiritual or material profit, but only for the glory and praise of My name, because I love them. In this way you will fulfil the whole commandment of the Law, which is to love Me above all things and your neighbour as your very self."

~ *Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)*

☪ **Devotional commentary:**

God's personal love for us flows out of His sheer grace and mercy, and is never self-serving or indulgent. While we can never repay God, we are to give away this same pure love to others for the glory and praise of His name. God's personal love for us is communal, and not individualistic. When we love God above all things with our entire being, we will also love our neighbour as our very selves. This is how love works in God's Kingdom.

☺ **Over to You:**

We often bemoan that we cannot experience God's love. Could it be that we have failed to understand the essence of God's love – that we are to give it to others? But how can we give unless we have first received God's gracious gift of love with gratitude? Let us open our hearts to receive God's love today.

✠ **Prayer**

"And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him." (1 Jn. 4:16)
Loving Father, fill us with your love so it may overflow to others.

Further reading: Gen. 49:1-28; 1 Cor. 10:14-11:1; Mark 7:24-37

OUR IDENTITY

Bible Reading John 8:3-11

Jesus' treatment of the adulterous woman provides a wonderful example of grace and acceptance. Jesus had gone to the Temple courts to teach. He had just sat down, when the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees brought in a woman and made her stand before the people.

"Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery," they said. "In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" The Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus. If Jesus said "Stone her," he would be in trouble with the Roman authorities, as the Romans did not permit the Jews to carry out the death sentence. If He said, "Don't stone her," He could be accused of going against the Jewish Law.

Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with His finger. When they continued to question Him, He said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." When they heard this, they began to slink away until Jesus was left alone with the woman.

Jesus asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir" she answered. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus told her. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Jesus shows us what it means to know grace and truth. He offered this woman grace in the form of forgiveness and acceptance. Grace has the power to bring us together with God and with others who also accept this grace. Jesus accepted her, knowing who she was. He accepted her true self, with her sinful desires and actions. He then gave her direction for the future: "Go now and leave your life of sin." These two ingredients together – acceptance and direction – serve to bring the real self into a relationship with God where healing can take place.

Reflection:

Many of us come to Christ because we are sinners and then spend the rest of our lives trying to prove we are not! We try to hide who we really are. Am I trying to be someone else through my own efforts? Or am I prepared to accept who I am based on a new nature and identity given to me in Christ, and not through anything I have ever done or will ever do?

Further reading: Gen. 49:29-50:14; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; Mark 8:1-10

WHISPERING HOPE

*SOFT AS THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL, BREAKING A LESSON UNHEARD,
HOPE WITH A GENTLE PERSUASION, WHISPERS HER COMFORTING WORD:
WAIT TILL THE DARKNESS IS OVER, WAIT TILL THE TEMPEST IS DONE,
HOPE FOR THE SUNSHINE TOMORROW, AFTER THE SHOWER IS GONE.*

REFRAIN:

*WHISPERING HOPE, OH, HOW WELCOME THY VOICE,
MAKING MY HEART IN ITS SORROW REJOICE.*

*HOPE, AS AN ANCHOR SO STEADFAST, RENDS THE DARK VEIL FOR THE SOUL.
WHILKER THE MASTER HAS ENTERED, ROBBING THE GRAVE OF ITS GOAL;
COME, THEN, OH, COME, GLAD FRUITION, COME TO MY SAD WEARY HEART;
COME, O THOU BLESSED HOPE OF GLORY, NEVER, OH, NEVER DEPART.*

*SHADOWS OF EVENING ARE FALLING, DARK WITH DEPRESSION AND FEAR,
BUT TO MY HEART THEY ARE CALLING, "JESUS THE SAVIOUR IS NEAR."
DREAD NOT THE ONCOMING TEMPEST, HOPE RIDES THE WINGS OF THE STORM,
GRIEF SHALL GIVE WAY TO REJOICING, WHEN CHRIST THE KING SHALL RETURN.*

REFRAIN:

*GLORIOUS HOPE, HE IS COMING AGAIN,
CHRIST THE REDEEMER IS COMING AGAIN.*

Bible Reading: 1 Peter 1:3-9; Acts 2:42-47

WHISPERING HOPE is a new Christian community birthed on 11 May 2008 and her mother-church is Emmanuel Methodist PJ. The ethos of EMC's founding members is not to be a mega-church but to plant new faith-communities when its membership reached 300 or so. And one new community of hope was made visible that day!

Why the name *Whispering Hope*? We want to whisper *Jesus the Saviour is near* – God's comforting Hope – persuasively yet gently. We want to breathe hope to people lost in darkness and struggling in the tempests of life, especially youth and young adults. We want to proclaim a hope that is sure and steadfast, because Jesus our Hope has *robbed the grave of its goal*, and has given us new life - abundant and eternal. We want this whisper of hope to crescendo into a glorious shout that *Christ our Redeemer-King is coming again!*

Allow me to share with you some snippets of ‘whispers of hope’ stories.

A young working adult, who had been hopping from church to church has now found a home with us, and is living this out in active and joyous service.

A college student was so traumatized by and angry with his father that he could only call him ‘that old man’. By walking with him, counselling, praying, home-stays and example, he has been set on the road of healing within himself. He can now call ‘that old man’ his ‘father’ and hopefully his relationship with his father will be restored.

A young lady, brilliant yet shy, was encouraged and given an opportunity to serve as an expression of genuine ‘body-life’. And she blossomed into a budding worship leader and musician, and grew deeper in the Lord.

A couple troubled by work and financial issues, felt secure enough, after some time, to share their troubles with the community. And they were deeply moved and strengthened by the support shown not only in prayer and a coming together, but also materially.

A young lady, upset by what happened in her previous church, locked in her God-given musical talents. We waited, giving her time and space. With gentle persuasion and God’s promptings, she finally opened up again and is now blessing people with her wonderful music for the Lord.

We thank God for the many ordinary yet wonderful people who have availed themselves to be God’s channel of hope through – listening and praying, playing sports and ‘lepaking’, counselling and mentoring, providing transport, being foster parents, preparing and providing meals, opening and sharing homes, teaching, and worshipping together. Together we are whispering (God’s) hope to our community!

To Listen to the song, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBe4lADkE-c>

Further reading: Gen. 50:15-26; 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Mark 8:11-26

DAILY THANKS

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit." JOHN 15:5

Bible Reading: John 15:1-8

Jesus' teaching in the gospels suggests He had firsthand knowledge about trading, farming, fertilizing, plowing, growing crops, pruning bushes, and working as night watchman. In John 15, Jesus' working knowledge of the vineyard enables Him to draw out timeless lessons from the ordinary.

By observing the intimate relationship between the vine and branches, Jesus says we are more than servants when we serve God -- we become friends of God (John 15:15).

During a silent retreat, I was asked to look at a tree and think of myself as a branch drawing water from Jesus, the trunk of life. I could see that the branch and trunk are distinct yet seamlessly united. Gradually I realized my total dependency on God. When I "remain" in God, He is intimately close. I am His, and He is mine. This awareness of who God is to me eventually gave me boldness to do what's necessary: quit a job, finish writing a book, and then wait to see what happens next.

We do not have to look for God in the extraordinary. He reveals Himself in the ordinary.

Over to you

In the next 24 hours, cultivate your friendship with God in the ordinary. Go for a walk with your thoughts focused on God. Spend lunchtime alone with God and meditate on John 15:5. Wash the dishes while giving thanks to God. Be creative.

At nightfall, honestly review the day, knowing that God calls you His friend. Consider the events and your feelings. Do you have something to be grateful for? Then give thanks. Is there something to be sorry for? Then ask for forgiveness.

Further reading: Exod. 1:6-22; 1 Cor. 12:12-26; Mark 8:27-9:1

CONTEMPLATION TO ATTAIN THE LOVE OF GOD⁷

Take, LORD, and accept all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. All that I have and possess, Thou hast given all to me. To Thee, O LORD, I return it. All is Thine. Dispose of it wholly according to Thy will. Give me Thy love and Thy grace, for this is sufficient for me.

~ *St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)*

🕯 **Devotional commentary:**

Ignatius recognised that all he was, and all that he possessed came from God. Therefore, he returned to God what was rightfully His and was fully contented with having God's love and grace. In our materialistic and acquisitive culture, we tend to be self-obsessed and possessed by our possessions. How we need the simplicity and freedom of being contented with just one desire – that of having God's love and grace. Then we would live in peace and gratitude because God's love and grace is sufficient for us.

🕯 **Over to You**

I wonder what is your consuming passion or desire in life. What is the state of your being? Who or what owns you? When is enough enough? May Ignatius' prayer inspire you to seek after God's love and grace as being enough for you.

✝ **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, in You 'we live, move and have our being'. Grant us to be contented with Your love and Your grace in our lives from day to day.

Further reading: Exod. 2:1-22; 1 Cor. 12:27-13:3; Mark 9:2-13

FAITH THAT HEALS

Bible Reading: Mark 5:25-34

The woman in this story--her name is unknown-- suffered from a condition which was very hard to cure. She had gone through intense suffering. For twelve long years, the doctors could not find a way to stop the flow of blood. Imagine how pale and haggard she must have looked!

And yet, she did not dare to go to Jesus to talk to Him about it openly. She felt ashamed of herself. She was determined to come up behind Jesus in the crowd, to touch the hem of His coat. She had faith that if she did so, she would be healed. When she touched Him, Jesus noticed that power had gone out from Him. This courageous woman was healed. The bleeding ceased at once.

In this woman's case, the physicians had no success with the treatment and, instead of getting better, her illness became worse at their hands. This woman went to Jesus as a last resort. Having tried every other cure that the world had offered, she finally tried Him. She did not ask Him for medicine, nor did she burden Him with a long story of suffering. She went there merely to touch His garment. Her faith told her that that would suffice to heal her. She was right; she returned to her home completely healed.

Faith in God can accomplish astounding things. Jesus Himself said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you." Because of her faith she did not lose hope when medical aid had failed but kept reaching out to God for healing.

Reflection:

Does God always reward the faith of everyone by healing or by removing their suffering? If not, what does He do?

Further reading: Exod. 2:23-3:15; 1 Cor. 13:1-13; Mark 9:14-29

WONDERFUL GRACE OF JESUS

*Wonderful Grace of Jesus, Greater than all my sin;
How shall my tongue describe it, Where shall its praise begin?
Taking away my burden, Setting my spirit free;
For the wonderful Grace of Jesus, reaches me!*

Refrain:

*Wonderful the matchless Grace of Jesus,
Deeper than the mighty rolling sea;
Wonderful Grace, all sufficient for me, for even me.
Broader than the scope of my transgressions,
Greater far than all my sin and shame,
O magnify the precious Name of Jesus.
Praise His Name!*

*Wonderful Grace of Jesus, reaching to all the lost,
By it I have been pardoned, saved to the uttermost;
Chains have been torn asunder, giving me liberty,
For the wonderful Grace of Jesus reaches me!*

*Wonderful Grace of Jesus, reaching the most defiled,
By its transforming power, making him God's dear child.
Purchasing peace and heaven for all eternity;
And the wonderful Grace of Jesus reaches me!*

Words/Music: HALDOR LILLENAS (1885-1959)

Bible Reading: Psalm 8, especially verses 3-4

We were asked to be silent, in solitude, to be present to God. But it wasn't easy. El Sanctuary was noisy with the chatter of youths, and burning hot, even in the shade. And there were other distractions to contend with too – weariness from the wear and tear of daily life, sickness, and ongoing struggles with people and God.

Yet, GOD met us, in His grace and mercy.

The first night, when the 'small silence' began, I stood in the open field, leaned against one of the cars, and looked up to the sky – something I don't usually do. And GOD surprised me. The sky was filled with stars! Millions of them, I suppose. Big and small, near and far, bright and not-so-bright, but all twinkling and smiling. The more I looked, the more I saw. I closed my eyes, opened them again, and the stars were still there, flickering even brighter. And then, a red light - flashing, cutting across the sky, like a paintbrush, steadily.

And GOD spoke.

The stars spoke of His grace upon grace to me, a wretched sinner. The flashing light of the plane spoke of The Hand that paints the sky. The vastness of the canopy spoke of an infinite God who still had time to look at me, smile at me ... a little speck, on a field, one night!

*I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous,
your handmade sky-jewellery,
moon and stars mounted in their settings.
Then I look at my micro-self and wonder,
Why do you bother with us?
Why take a second look our way?
--Psalm 8:3-4, The Message (Peterson).*

And I broke out in song, in my heart, on my lips. I was chastened, humbled, and yet affirmed.

*Wonderful grace of Jesus,
Greater than all my sin;
How shall my tongue describe it,
Where shall its praise begin;
Taking away my burden,
Setting my spirit free;
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me!*

To hear the song, go to

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0BUw44uA6k&feature=related>

Further reading: Exod. 4:10-31; 1 Cor. 14:1-19; Mark 9:30-41

PRAYER IN WORK

"Even I prayed to the God of heaven." Nehemiah 2:4

Bible Reading: Nehemiah 2:1-5

In medieval times, a farmer prayed in the morning before he tilled the land. Noonday bells rang to remind him to pause for prayer. At dusk, the bells rang again, prompting the farmer to say a thanksgiving prayer.

Church bells don't ring in Malaysia. But we can learn the habit of habitually turning to God, praying while we work, just as Nehemiah breathed a quick prayer in the midst of an important conversation with the king. At a critical moment, Nehemiah recollected God's presence. Without this instinct of remembering God, we end up living as practical atheists, going through the motions without God. (Note: Nehemiah also spent many hours in intentional prayer. Spontaneous and fixed prayers are necessary and symbiotic.)

Cardinal Wyszynski observes that the greater the love we have for God, the more spontaneous prayer becomes. "To raise the level of love in work means to raise the level of prayer. The raising up of the thought, will and heart to God in heavy daily work -- this is the most noble form of adoring God," says Wyszynski.

Over to you

How do we practice the presence of God? Learn this prayer prayed by the saints through the ages: "Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue" (Ps. 70:1). There are numerous moments during the day when you can pray this: as you drive to work, step into your office, boot up computer, write an email, and during lunch. You can ask God to come to your help while caring for kids, walking with your spouse, washing plates, doing homework, or laying down to sleep. Over time, this frequent habitual prayer will transform your inner life.

Further reading: Exod. 5:1-6:1; 1 Cor. 14:20-33a, 39-40; Mark 9:42-50

NOT TO THINK MUCH BUT TO LOVE MUCH⁸

"I ONLY WISH TO INFORM YOU THAT IN ORDER TO PROFIT BY THIS PATH AND ASCEND TO THE DWELLING PLACES WE DESIRE, THE IMPORTANT THING IS NOT TO THINK MUCH BUT TO LOVE MUCH; AND SO DO THAT WHICH BEST SERVES YOU TO LOVE. PERHAPS WE DON'T KNOW WHAT LOVE IS. I WOULDN'T BE VERY SURPRISED, BECAUSE IT DOESN'T CONSIST IN GREAT DELIGHT BUT IN DESIRING WITH STRONG DETERMINATION TO PLEASE GOD IN EVERYTHING, IN SERVING, INsofar AS POSSIBLE, NOT TO OFFEND HIM, AND IN ASKING HIM FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE HONOUR AND GLORY OF HIS SON AND THE INCREASE OF THE [CHURCH]. THESE ARE THE SIGNS OF LOVE. . ."

~ St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

🕯 Devotional commentary:

St. Teresa of Avila, in her book *The Interior Castle* (in the chapter entitled 'the Fourth Mansion'), taught that prayer is not to do with techniques, nor for spiritual gains, but for loving interaction with God, if we are to progress in our faith. The problem is that we don't know what love is: Love is never self-seeking, not even for spiritual delight, but always seeking first the Lover, doing our utmost to please Him and honouring Him in everything. Because of our innate self-centredness, we experience the wounds of love as our old nature is demolished. The moulding process can be arduous and painful. When God seems more absent than present, remember: *the important thing is not to think much but to love much*, and to persevere in humility.

☺ Over to You:

May the following poem by Teresa encourage you to let God be your all-consuming passion: "*Let nothing trouble you, let nothing scare you. All is fleeting, God alone is unchanging. Patience everything obtains. Who possesses God nothing wants. God alone suffices.*"

✠ Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, in times of spiritual dryness when nothing I do can help me to experience Your love, help me not to think much but to love much, for You alone are enough for me.

Further reading: Exod. 7:8-24; 2 Cor. 2:14-3:6; Mark 10:1-16

GOD LOVED THE WORLD SO MUCH

Bible Reading: John 3:16-21

A loving God created this world, and He loves it. He loves it so much that He sent His only Son not to judge the world but to give it life (John 3:16-17). Behind this mystery of Jesus and the tragedy of His crucifixion is a God who loves.

When we gaze upon the crucified Son of God, we begin to understand the extent of God's love for us. He gave His only Son so that we might have life. The cross is at the heart of John's new picture of a God who is Love. How comforting to hear that Jesus has not been sent by His Father to judge us but to save us.

We are still capable of making choices that keep us living in darkness (vv.19-20) but Jesus, the Light of the world, is here. The Light has come into the world and revealed God to us so that we might know Him.

Lent is a season when we look to the Cross and meditate upon the events surrounding it. The execution that was carried out on Jesus arouses in us feelings of sorrow and horror. Today's Gospel reading tells us that God freely gave His Son so that we who believe in Him might have eternal life. That is an extraordinary love!

As Jesus said: "Greater love has no man that this that he lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I tell you. (John 15:13-14)

Reflection:

In the midst our daily lives, do we experience the love of God? Let us learn to take time to pause during our waking hours to reflect and worship the God who lavishes His love on us.

Further reading: Exod. 7:25-8:19; 2 Cor. 3:7-18; Mark 10:17-31

AMAZING GRACE

*Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!*

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.*

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
His grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

*Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.*

*Words: John Newton, 1779 (stanzas 1-5);
stanza 6 by John Rees (19th century)*

Bible Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Hendrick and I were novices, but we had this thought of starting *Alpha* at the hospital where we worked. Kim, Suren and Jennifer joined in and the idea soon became reality. Yet, up to the day before we were to begin, we hardly knew how many (or few) were coming, and I was still sending out invitations, in person and to my facebook contacts.

Wednesday, 16.09.09, 1745 hours: One by one, they trickled in; some familiar, others strangers. We said, “hello”, smiled and shook hands, and mingled as best as we could over a cup of tea. Hendrick began with some words of welcome and introduced the Alpha course. Then I led in singing and we sang just the one song: *Amazing Grace!*

Each week, the people continued to come, about 30. We were surprised! There were so many, especially women, that we had to call for help. Kim, Jane, Rosalind and Gay, all fellow Jesus-lovers, came to lend a hand.

4.11.09, 1900 hours. Nicky Gumbel had finished speaking on “How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?” Then we broke into two groups, one for men and the other women, for prayer and ministry. And quite a few came up for prayer, and another young lady committed her life to Jesus Christ!

How apt then that the first song we sang was ‘Amazing Grace’. We had chosen this song simply for its familiarity. But God surprised us with His grace. Amazing!

At first, we thought perhaps a dozen might turn up. But God brought a crowd, even folks from outside the hospital. There was a palpable sense of Christian fellowship brewing. A young man asked, “What’s after Alpha? Can we have some kind of fellowship and Bible study?” God’s word went forth and lives turned around. A man from Sabah spoke of how he had wandered away from the Lord but this *Alpha* course had brought him back on track. A lady doctor was moved to take on a more active role in her family devotions, and her children were taken aback! We were short-handed and God provided. Abby stepped forward to serve as a worship leader and ladies from two churches helped in the discussion groups.

Alpha @ SunMed? Truly God’s *Amazing Grace!*

To listen to the song sung by Il Divo, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEa2qAPMG3o&feature=related>

Further reading: Exod. 9:13-35; 2 Cor. 4:1-12; Mark 10:32-45

WORK AS VOCATION

"He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature." 2 Peter 1:3

Bible Reading: 2 Peter 1:3-11

Our highest calling is to participate with the work of God so that we may be one with God. How do we do this? Peter tells us to "make every effort to confirm your calling" (2 Peter 1:10).

Consider your present job. Like most jobs, it's a mixed bag. The following questions may help you consider how your work (no matter how dreary) can be confirmed into a calling:

= Are you doing the Lord's work? It is possible for your present work to be in harmony with God's grand purpose for creation.

= Are you working for love? God doesn't call us to something we loathe doing. He desires love to be kindled when we work.

= Are you convinced your work has intrinsic value? You are working not just for pay. Some aspect of your work may endure forever.

= Are you experiencing God working within you? He will shape and renew you while you work, so you may participate in the divine nature.

Over to you

Bring before God your daily tasks, duties and work. Give thanks to the Lord for:

= how your work is not truly yours, but it is work that God has given to you (1 Cor. 15:58)

= how the Son of God took on the lowest work so we can participate in the King's noble work

= how even the dirtiest work can become service when we do it in cooperation with God

= how whatever work we do enables us to perceive some radiance of God's love.

Further reading: Exod. 10:21-11:8; 2 Cor. 4:13-18; Mark 10:46-52

THE DARK NIGHT⁹

**1. One DARK NIGHT,
FIRED WITH LOVE'S URGENT
LONGINGS
- ah, THE SWEET GRACE! -
I WENT OUT UNSEEN,
MY HOUSE BEING NOW ALL STILLED.**

**2. In DARKNESS AND SECURE,
BY THE SECRET LADDER, DISGUISED.
- ah, THE SWEET GRACE! -
IN DARKNESS AND CONCEALMENT,
MY HOUSE BEING NOW ALL STILLED.**

~ **St. JOHN OF THE CROSS (1542-1591)**

🕯 **Devotional commentary:**

These are the first two of eight stanzas of *The Dark Night of the Soul*. The poem describes the 'journey' of one who seeks to draw closer to God. A young believer may experience God through the various senses e.g. seeing prayers answered, finding Scripture exciting, feeling God's presence in worship. But as we mature, God may let us experience His seeming absence. Now, we can no longer depend on our 'senses' to know God's presence. This is what John means by *the dark night of the soul*. All familiar efforts to relate with God fail to bring tangible spiritual gains. Prayers bounce off the ceiling; reading Scripture is dull; God's presence is not felt. It is as if one's *house of senses is all stilled*, as we are led into new adventures of the soul by God's grace.

This *dark night* of the senses prepares us for further spiritual growth in the *dark night* of the spirit as described in the second stanza. Here God draws us even nearer to Himself without any human effort, which would only hinder our spiritual progress. Let God be God, and we be contented to be human beings secured in His love!

☺ **Over to You:**

As we grow in our knowledge and love of God, we face the subtle temptation of holding on to familiar ways of relating with God, or even to past experiences of God. This is counter-productive to our progress. At best, we are responders to God's love, seeking only to please Him.

✠ **Prayer**

Father, I acknowledge that all is of grace. When you seem more absent than present, teach me to walk by faith and not by sight, fired with 'love's urgent longings' as God's beloved child.

Further reading: Lam. 1:1-2, 6-12; 2 Cor. 1:1-7; Mark 11:12-25

JESUS CALLS

Bible Reading: Mark 1:16-20

Notice how Jesus picks the moment to act. As long as John was announcing the kingdom around the region of the River Jordan, Jesus could wait. But when John is put into prison He knows that it is time to act. It is time to start His public ministry.

He comes into this Galilean village to announce that God's time had come. We see Jesus preaching by the shore and selecting four fishermen to become His first disciples. How did Jesus pick His disciples?

- Notice who they are: They are simple folk. They were not from any religious schools or aristocracy. They were fishermen, ordinary people just like you and me.
- Notice what they were doing when Jesus called them. They were at their daily work, catching fish and mending nets. They were busy people, just like you and me.
- Notice how He called them. All He said was, "Come, follow me. I will make you fishers of men." They probably stood there among the crowd and wondered what he was talking about. Undoubtedly, they were drawn to him. A man follows Jesus not only because of what Jesus said but because of everything that Jesus is.
- Notice what Jesus offered them. He gave them a task. He called them to a task where they could win something for themselves by giving their whole lives to Him and others.

This story reminds us that discipleship has a price tag. We must be willing to give up something in order to bring the good news to others.

Reflection:

Each of us has a mission in life. Jesus prayed to his Father for his followers saying "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." (John 17:18).

We are sent into the world by God, just as Jesus was. Once we start living our lives with that conviction in our hearts, we will soon know what we are sent to do.

Further reading: Lam. 1:17-22; 2 Cor. 1:8-22; Mark 11:27-33

THERE IS A HIGHER THRONE

*There is a higher throne
 than all this world has known
 Where faithful ones from every tongue
 Will one day come.
 Before the Son we'll stand
 Made faultless through the Lamb
 Believing hearts find promised grace
 Salvation comes*

CHORUS:

*Hear heaven's voices sing
 Their hundred's anthem rings
 Through emerald courts and sapphire skies
 Their praises rise
 All glory, wisdom, power
 Strength, thanks and honour are to
 God, our King who reigns on high
 Forevermore*

*And there we'll find our home
 Our life before the throne
 We'll honour Him in perfect song
 Where we belong.
 He'll wipe each tearstained eye
 And thirst and hunger die
 The Lamb becomes our Shepherd King
 We'll reign with Him.*

Words & Music: Keith Getty & Kristyn Lennox

Bible Reading: Revelation 5

The first time I heard the song, I loved it! The lyrics were uplifting and the tune majestic. I got the score, you-tubed the video and have since shared it with others at every opportunity. Another opportunity came on the last day of the 34th Session of the TRAC Annual Conference.

I was to lead in the morning worship. Michelle and Jane had led in contemporary worship the two previous mornings. I chose something different -- a more reflective style with a three-fold rhythm of Scripture, Song and Silence (for prayer).

We began with Psalm 96, then a song of praise, “For the beauty of the earth”, followed by silent prayer which ended with the refrain, “Lord of all to Thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise!”

I then read Paul’s boast from Philippians 3:4-8. A hymn of confession came next: “When I survey the wondrous cross.” Silence followed – a time for personal and corporate confession.

The Conference was ending, and we were about to go our separate ways. Our President, Rev. Dr. H.T. Ong, had challenged us as Christ’s disciples to cast our nets wider and into deeper waters.

The keynote speaker, Dr. Steve Seamands, had continued the challenge by taking us to Mount Moriah (‘give up your best to God’) and to Gilgal (‘cast off your shame before God’).

The challenge of ‘spreading scriptural holiness and transforming the nation’ would be great, the work arduous, and the obstacles a-plenty. We will be confronted by and in conflict with many ‘thrones’ set up by fallen humankind and spiritual powers.

But this song reminds us that *there is a higher throne than all this world has known, where faithful ones from every tongue will one day come*. That before the King of kings and Lord of lords, all others are mini-thrones, pseudo-thrones, and empty-thrones. It assures us that *there we’ll find our home...there we belong...the Lamb will become our Shepherd-King and we’ll reign with Him*. We will be bruised, battered, and even martyred in the work of kingdom-building. But as the Lamb became the Shepherd-King, we, too, will reign with Him one day.

As we sang, we were exhorted, and we were uplifted. And we sang with heaven’s voices this ringing anthem, “All glory, wisdom, pow’r, strength, thanks and honour are to God, our King who reigns forevermore.”

Amen! Amen! Amen!

To listen to the song, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZuU2wPms38>

Further reading: Lam. 2:1-9, 14-17; 2 Cor. 1:23-2:11; Mark 12:1-11

INCARNATION - A DEEP IMPACT STRATEGY

"THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND LIVED FOR A WHILE AMONG US" JOHN 1:14

Bible Reading: John 1:1-14

Brother John D'Cruz, a well-loved headmaster of St. George's Institution in Taiping, resigned from his prestigious post so he could live for five years among the poor in Sungai Pinang, Penang. He rode the bus everyday. He tutored school dropouts. Eventually his lived experience -- in a house shared among 12 families -- gave him the insights to start a Learning Centre with a methodology to teach poor students the skills of lifelong learning. Brother John would not have arrived at his long-term strategies if he had not lived among the poor.

As this Lent season draws to a close, we remind ourselves that God never sent a letter to share good news. God sent a person. Jesus didn't just speak to the poor. He became poor.

Today, who are the people in our workplace, neighborhoods and families who are experiencing material, relational and spiritual poverty? How can we enter their world to share their fears and aspirations and to prayerfully and practically work for personal and societal change?

Over to you

Frederick Buechner writes: "The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work that you need most to do and the world most needs to have done. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

= What makes you glad and joyful? What is your heart's deepest inclination?

= What do you see/hear that pains you? What is the world's deep hunger for you?

Share these with the Lord. Ask Him to guide you to the place where your deep gladness and world's deep hunger meet.

Further reading: Lam. 2:10-18; 1 Cor. 10:14-17; Mark 14:12-25

THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE¹⁰**1. O LIVING FLAME OF LOVE**

**THAT TENDERLY WOUNDS MY SOUL
 IN ITS DEEPEST CENTRE! SINCE
 NOW YOU ARE NOT OPPRESSIVE,
 NOW CONSUMMATE! IF IT BE YOUR WILL:
 TEAR THROUGH THE VEIL OF THIS SWEET ENCOUNTER!**

2. O SWEET CAUTERY,

**O DELIGHTFUL WOUND!
 O GENTLE HAND! O DELICATE TOUCH
 THAT TASTES OF ETERNAL LIFE!
 AND PAYS EVERY DEBT!
 IN KILLING YOU CHANGED DEATH TO LIFE.**

3. O LAMPS OF FIRE

**IN WHOSE SPLENDOURS
 THE DEEP CAVERNS OF FEELING,
 ONCE OBSCURE AND BLIND,
 NOW GIVE FORTH, SO RARELY, SO EXQUISITELY,
 BOTH WARMTH AND LIGHT TO THEIR BELOVED.**

4. HOW GENTLY AND LOVINGLY

**YOU WAKE IN MY HEART,
 WHERE IN SECRET YOU DWELL ALONE;
 AND IN YOUR SWEET BREAKING,
 FILLED WITH GOOD AND GLORY,
 HOW TENDERLY YOU SWELL MY HEART WITH LOVE.**

~ St. JOHN OF THE CROSS (1542-1591)

🕯 **Devotional commentary:**

The Living Flame of Love was John's attempt to describe his mystical union with God. When we are ignorant of the nature of God's love, we mistake His parental discipline as oppressive and punitive. But as we grow in uniting our will with God's will in a deepening understanding of His ways, we welcome His corrective actions in our lives as working toward our eternal good. This is shown in John's use of imagery such as *living flame*, *sweet cautery*, *delightful wound*, in *killing you changed death to life*. What keeps us earth-bound is our old sinful nature. Hence, it is in dying to all earthly attachments that we are born into our true nature as God's beloved who are united to Him in love for all eternity.

😊 **Over to You:**

Notice your response to this romantic poem: what attracts or repels you? Bring your awareness to the Lord, dialogue with Him and listen for His voice in the depths of your heart. What do you desire the Lord to do for you?

✝ **Prayer**

Eternal God, our Merciful Father, we can only come to you as we are, and not as we should be or as we ought to be, because you have paid the debt of our sinfulness. O Holy Spirit, burn away the dross in our lives so that we may live more fully for your glory.

Further reading: Lam. 3:1-9, 19-33; 1 Pet. 1:10-20; John 13:36-38

HOW DEEP THE FATHER'S LOVE

*How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wreck His treasure
How great the pain of searing loss,
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the chosen One,
Bring many sons to glory*

*Behold the Man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice,
Call out among the scoffers
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished*

*I will not boast in anything
No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and resurrection
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom*

Words & Music: Stuart Townend

Bible Reading: Isaiah 53; John 19:16-30.

I met this song for the first time when my daughter Xian played it on the piano. I was up in my room doing some work when my ears picked up a haunting melody. I came down and checked. She knew the title but had neither score nor lyrics. The tune, however, continued to play in my mind.

Soon after, I heard it again. This time, it was sung during worship at the annual Klang Valley Bible Exposition series. Now, I had the title and lyrics but still no music score! And I didn't have the tech-savvy presence of mind to 'google' for it! As soon as I got home, I sat at the piano and played from memory and sang:

*How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure,
that He should give His only Son to make a wretch His treasure.*

Tears of remorse welled up in my eyes because I knew I was that wretch-- the one who caused God the Father *the pain of the searing loss* of His only Son. I was that sinner whose transgression he bore upon His shoulders. I was that mocking voice that crucified Him, the scoffer who nailed Him on the Cross of shame till with His dying breath He proclaimed, "It is finished!"

I continued to sing in breaking voice, and cheeks wet.

Yet God the Father gave His only Son to make this wretch His treasure, His wounds paying my ransom! Why? Because the Father loves me with a love so deep and vast beyond all measure. Shocking! Amazing! Unbelievable, yet true! And I knew this in my body, mind and spirit!

My heart lightened, as tears of joy now mixed in and rolled down my face.

God's only Son died to make me one of God's many sons in His glorious kingdom – bringing us over from darkness into His marvellous light, and from death to life! Once we were 'no people' but now we are the 'people of God'.

With a glad heart, I wiped away the tears and then raised my voice to sing:

*I will not boast in anything, no gifts, no power, no wisdom.
But I will boast In Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection!*

I deserved nothing, but in His love, He gave me everything!

*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of
death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

To Listen to the Song, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjD0lv8hx5o>

Further reading: Lam. 3:37-58; Heb. 4:1-16; Rom. 8:1-11

THE WRITERS

DR SAMUEL ONG

Sam is a servant of God, a family person and a doctor of hearts, both physical and spiritual. Blessed with many talents by God's amazing grace, he is active in many different arenas of life. He has a passion for young people, the All Blacks and hymns. He currently serves as TRAC Conference Lay Leader and a pioneering church-planting leader at Whispering Hope. He is married to Loo Ling and they have three lovely daughters (Ming, Xian and En) and two adorable Labrador Retrievers (Pepper and Summer).

MR ALVIN UNG

Alvin Ung is a Fellow at Khazanah Nasional where he is writing a collection of essays on the mindsets of path-breaking Malaysians. He has lectured and facilitated workshops and retreats on the integration of faith and work in seminaries and churches in Kuala Lumpur, Manila and Vancouver. Alvin has co-authored a forthcoming book, *Work in Progress: Conversations on Growing Spiritually in the Workplace*, to be published by Eerdmans. He and his wife, Huey Fern, along with baby Andrew, are part of a multi-ethnic team that's planting a church in Puchong.

DR VOON CHOON KHING

Life has been an adventure with God for Choon Khing ever since her conversion in 1966. From an early infantile perception of God's call to nursing in UK, she gradually discovers that her varied stations in life, whether as a nurse, midwife, missionary, social worker, librarian, counselor, teacher, and spiritual director, are merely creative expressions of God's primary call on her as God's beloved. With a strong conviction that there is only one life to live, she is passionate about investing her life in eternity. Both she and her husband, Dr Chow Heap Yeong, desire to grow together in God's Delight, becoming conduits of God's Love and Grace along life journey.

MR P. SAKTHIVEL

P. Sakthivel is married to Ling Hua Hiong and they have 2 lovely daughters, Sue Ann and Ivy. He came to know the Lord, while being involved with the Boys Brigade in ACS, Kampar. He worships at Taman Ujong Methodist Church. He is also one of library staff of Seminari Theoloji Malaysia. His other interest include reading, listening to music, and outdoor activities.

APPENDIX

Notes on the Mystics

1. St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

Said to be the first of the Italian mystics, Francis was born to a wealthy family and lived a carefree, comfortable life. But spiritual hunger drove him to seek God's will. In 1209, he chose a life of 'apostolic poverty' and literal obedience to Jesus' commands. His prayer that begins with these words: "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace" has inspired many of us to desire to be channels of God's love. Franciscans today run schools, hospitals, shelters, and many other services for the poor.

2. Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-1413)

Dame Julian, the most popular of the English mystics, was educated under the Benedictine Order. She was well trained in the Bible and the teachings of the Church. When she was 30, she became seriously ill and during this period of illness, God granted to her a series of visions. Julian always pointed to the goodness and love of God, especially in her book *Revelations of Divine Love*.

3. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Catherine was the 24th of 25 children. Even as a child, Catherine began to see visions. At the age of 19, she began to care for the sick, the poor, and to convert sinners. Though always suffering terrible physical pain, and living for long intervals on little food, she was ever radiantly happy and full of wisdom. Her writings rank among the classics of the Italian language.

4. St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)

Ignatius lived a refined and extravagant life as a member of the nobility. In 1521, while in the army, his leg was seriously wounded. While convalescing, he read books about Christ and was genuinely converted. Ignatius taught much about spiritual formation in his *Book of Spiritual Exercises*. He eventually founded the Society of Jesus, together with fellow student, Francis Xavier, who became a missionary to Asia. We in Malaysia have benefited from the work of the Jesuits who founded mission schools in Penang and Melaka.

5. St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

At the age of 20, Teresa, whose parents were pious and saintly, entered the Carmelite Convent where she lived a very devout life. In the convent, she fell seriously ill and her health became permanently impaired. During these years of suffering, she began to practise mental prayer and she experienced visions more frequently. The account of her spiritual life recorded in the *Interior Castle* is a remarkable spiritual biography.

6. St. John of the Cross (1542-1591)

John was born to a poor family in Castile, Spain. In 1563, he became a Carmelite monk. He studied philosophy and theology at one of Europe's leading universities and was ordained in 1567. He worked with Teresa of Avila and established several monasteries. John endured torture and a brutal nine-month imprisonment at the hands of those who opposed his reforms. During this time, he composed his most famous work, *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

¹ Lavinia Byrne, *The Life and Wisdom of Francis of Assisi* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998):

² The Julian Shrine, *Enfolded in Love: Daily Readings with Julian of Norwich* (Bombay, St Paul Pubs, 1980): 60.

³ The Julian Shrine, *Enfolded in Love: Daily Readings with Julian of Norwich* (Bombay, St Paul Pubs, 1980): 59.

⁴ The Julian Shrine, *Enfolded in Love: Daily Readings with Julian of Norwich* (Bombay, St Paul Pubs, 1980): 15.

⁵ Suzanne Noffke, O.P. tr., *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue* (NY: Paulist Pr., 1980): 48.

⁶ Suzanne Noffke, O.P. tr., *Catherine of Siena: The Dialogue* (NY: Paulist Pr., 1980): 165.

⁷ Louis J Puhl S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Manila: St Paul's Pubs, [1949]): 89.

⁸ Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. & Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D. tr., *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Vol.2: The Interior Castle IV*, 7 (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980): 319.

⁹ Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. & Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. tr., *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (Washington, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991): 50-52.

¹⁰ Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. & Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. tr., *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (Washington, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991): 52-53.