



A WALK IN THE FOREST

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Preface:

On a warm, sunny Friday afternoon, I was strolling in our garden with my daughter Joanna. The Lord came to me in the garden, the place of quietness and beauty, and told me to go to France. France, the country that had captured my attention during Bible College days and filled me with a compelling curiosity.

In the little village of Trosly-Breuil, L'Arche was born and so began a spiritual movement which has sought to give life to the 'handicapped' person (person with a disability).

"A Walk in the Forest" is a collection of thoughts and observations, written over three months I was living in L'Arche homes in France and England.

Let me invite you to "A Walk in the Forest."

Autumn 1980

Introduction:

A forest is never static. A forest is growing, changing, maturing, dying, awakening. A leaf falls gently to the ground, a twig snaps, a new shoot emerges, a ray of light filters through the spreading branches, a bird whistles and life moves on.

A forest has charm, splendour, beauty, strength, stability, and presence.

A forest is dark, foreboding, damp, eerie, cold, and confining.

To enter the forest is to welcome moments of wonder, moments of reverence, moments of discovery, moments of solitude, moments of quiet, moments of disturbance, moments of anguish, moments of loneliness, moments of lostness, moments of timelessness, moments of peace.

Changing moments for the forest is changing.

A Walk in the Forest:

"Shepherd the people with your rod, the flock of your inheritance, who live alone in the forest in the midst of a fruitful land." Micah 7:14

Prior to leaving Australia the Lord impressed on me the thought, "A Walk in the Forest." At the time I was confused as to what it could mean. Now I can see more clearly. As I travelled from Calais to Compiègne, I saw dotted along the way wooded areas bordered on every side by cultivated land. The two stood side by side.

If we could see society for a moment as a forest, we would also see that within that forest there are many people, people who are lonely, people who are lost, people who are hungry, people who are dying, people who are blind to the fulness of life that awaits them on the edge of the forest.

The Lord is calling us to gather in our arms the lame, the outcast, the afflicted and to lead them out into a fruitful land where they might prosper and be as dew from the Lord in the midst of many people. Micah 5:7

The Language of Silence:

The clatter and bang of our noisy world has in part, drowned out the reality of 'the universality of the language of silence.'

The language of silence greets us on every side for it penetrates the façade of dissonant loudness.

The language of silence inspires, for it is the fertile soil in which the seeds of creativity awake.

The language of silence humbles for it exposes the nakedness of our frivolity.

The language of silence gently caresses for it is the quiet voice of the Lord dancing on our hearts.

A Processed Society:

We live in a processed society. We consume processed food, we absorb processed news, we languish in processed entertainment, we surrender to

processed educational disciplines, we feel shackled by processed law, and drugged by processed health care.

What have we lost?

- We have lost the mystery of life. A tiny seed no longer fills us with wonder.
- We have lost the reality of life. We find it difficult to perceive genuineness. The clouds of falsity block out the light.
- We have lost the challenge of life. The computer is our mouthpiece and besides, there are better things to think about.
- We have lost the rightness of life. The greyness of morality is a dark grey.
- We have lost the vitality of life. There must be a pill to calm, to quicken, to kill.

When will we realise that the processed dream ends up on the garbage dump?

I Met Jesus at Mass:

Have you ever met Jesus?

I attended mass this morning. The sun was warm, and a cool breeze brushed my face.

I sat with the severely handicapped - people with bent and twisted bodies forming ugly distorted shapes, people whose mouths issue forth saliva which hangs suspended from their chin, people who slap their face viciously, people who groan with deep sighs, people who cry uncontrollably, people who in many circles would be considered candidates for the human scrap heap.

I saw. I smiled. I felt. I hurt.

I turned my head to the right and observed hanging on the wall a picture. I saw portrayed the body of Jesus taken down from the cross.

A body bent and twisted, a body torn and bleeding, a body beaten and bruised, a body crying silently, a body rejected.

I saw. I no longer smiled. I felt. I hurt. I cried.

I had met Jesus.

A Parable:

I discovered in the forest that there are tall mature trees reaching high up into the heavens with a full covering of branches and leaves. Then there are the younger trees, spindly looking, bowed down, deprived of sunlight by their taller brothers.

I would imagine that there are people who would like to get rid of the trees with the bent backs. What they want is a forest of tall straight specimens. No rubbish please.

And yet there is a beauty in the less well-developed trees for those who have eyes to see. At least they are touchable.

Babel:

Pride easily finds a home in the heart of a person who is proficient in language.

Power for good and for evil.

power to understand

power to encourage

power to love

power to abuse

power to humiliate

power to kill

We wield our power in accordance with the rhythm of life. When our life experiences harmonise with our will, we raise the banner of goodness. If there is discord in the air, we draw the sword of bitterness and anger from its sheath.

Encountering the sounds of strange tongues humbles the proud spirit and prepares the ground for the seeds of gentleness.

The Lord honours a quiet and gentle spirit. Such a spirit finds beautiful expression in the life of the handicapped.

The Highway:

I went down to the highway and sat at the bus stop. The trucks rolled past, destined for the gluttonous city. The noise of their engines was angry, devouring the silence.

I felt in my body the hostility of the highway, a long snake with poison in its tongue.

I felt in my body the anguish of the pedestrian who wanted to make it to the other side, groping for safety.

I felt the horror of death, the death of two handicapped people, knocked from their bicycles.

Here on our doorstep is this monster which pampers the desires of the rich and destroys the hope of the poor.

Do we join the mad scramble or do we shout "Murder! Murder!?"

Home:

The concept of 'home' is facing an identity crisis as it falters under the restlessness of its inhabitants.

A home becomes a museum when visitors become intruders.

A home becomes a cafeteria when dinner is a matter of serving yourself and never mind about 'please' and 'thank you.'

A home becomes a motel when the only place you warm is your bed.

A home is where you live.

A place where the totality of your being finds expression.

A place which bears the mark of your creative flair.

A place which nurtures the deep desires of your heart.

By Candlelight:

The flickering candle awakened the motionless shapes in the room, shading their faces in light. Others had gathered, kneeling, sitting, a subdued

presence. Words of wonder and hope fell gently on our ears as rain on parched soil.

The solitary sounds of a harmonica beckoned adoration of Him. The unity of love found expression in extended hands.

The power of His Spirit unfolded imperceptibly.

Wait awhile. Do not hasten away.

Just Round the Corner:

It is worthy of reflection to consider what disturbing elements await us just round the corner.

The blatant aggression of evil is disturbing.

The subtle suggestion of evil is disturbing.

The obvious wounds of evil are disturbing.

The lingering vulnerability to evil is disturbing.

The apparent frailty before evil is disturbing.

The wise are prepared, for they have taken time to pray and to clothe themselves in the impenetrable presence of God.

The Lord is our rock.

The Lord is our fortress.

The Lord is our deliverer.

The Fruit of Humility:

Yesterday, I felt a heaviness. A cloud of despair lingered over me. I knew the Lord was present but was unable to reach Him. This is the mystery. We remain lost in the darkness until the Lord finds us.

It would seem the Lord has led me to a place of complete desolation for me to see that unless the Lord builds the house we labour in vain.

Moments of disillusionment are a prelude to moments of enlightenment. If there was no darkness, there would be no wonder of the light.

Humility is the fruit of brokenness and tears.

The Agony of the City:

People are walking the pavement

Each step depicts their haste

A destination awaits the traveler

Tell me. What is the race?

The faces picture life's struggle,

A mural of suffering and pain.

Each wrinkle a lingering memory

Tell me. Who caused the permanent stain?

The cars crawl by monotonously,

The stench from the gutter stings your nose

The sky is steamy and sunken

Tell me. How is it we continue to doze?

The shops are opening for business

The windows display their wares

The goods are gods of deception

Tell me. Who but the Lord really cares?

Peace:

The peace of God is a gift

It comes as the dew quietly

and imperceptibly

It comes as a dove in the

midst of loud voices

conflicting voices

threatening voices

disturbed voices

It comes by candlelight
watching.....waiting.....welcoming

It comes in a moment
a moment of weariness
a moment of emptiness
a moment of restlessness

May the Lord give you His peace.

Sexuality As Affirmation:

The exclusive nature of the 'sexuality of nakedness' detracts from the beauty of our destiny as purposed by God.

"The two shall become one."

The individualising of sexuality to the point of it becoming clinical self-gratification, has eroded our sense of communality. Sexuality achieves its purest expression when it affirms another.

Affirmation is

- a genuine hand shake
- a sincere thank you
- an honest smile
- a gentle encouragement
- a thoughtful acknowledgement
- an appreciative silence

Affirmation is free from deception. It expresses the love of the Father.

Planting Trees:

Everyone should plant a tree.

A tree is an emblem of time drawing together the past, present and future in one living expression of solidarity.

A tree humbly bears the marks of harsh seasonal extremities and man's lack of care.

A tree realises that maturity is dependent on a willingness to endure.

A tree gladly submits to the dominion of man thus allowing for diversity in usefulness.

A tree surrenders its fruit when it has not the strength to carry them.

A tree is a place of refuge for the hunted, a source of food for the hungry, and a place to rest for the weary.

A tree is deserving of our admiration and respect for it mirrors our pilgrimage.

The Maturity of Independence:

We are unique, purposeful people with a destiny to fulfil. The imperative for us all is to discover the maturity of independence.

What are the essential elements of independence?

- Mobility is independence –

A baby strives to roll over, to sit up, to crawl, to stand, to walk. Success has its rewards, a new dimension of freedom.

A handicapped person feels liberated when they can get on a bus, state their destination, and get off at the other end without any outside help.

- Achievement is independence –

A baby is always wanting to try, to explore, to experiment, to interact with the world around. A baby who can feed herself has discovered that she is an achiever and has acquired the power of choice.

A handicapped person struggles to tie a shoelace, to make their bed, to print their name, but wholeness awaits to greet them should they succeed.

- Creativity is independence –

A baby plays with her doll, scribbles with her crayon, bangs on the piano, squeezes the play dough.

Beauty, pleasure, excitement, wonder, discovery, lie at the heart of creativity.

The handicapped person knits a scarf, plays on his bongos, ices the biscuits, puts together a jigsaw puzzle.

Creativity is the world of the 'child' and a smouldering ember in the heart of the wounded.

A Thorn in the Flesh:

That area of being which sustains a spirit of poverty.

That encounter with humanness which intensifies our crying out to the Father.

That awareness of truth which sees the suffering of our fallenness.

That intimacy of tears which purifies the soiled garment.

That brokenness of will which awaits the transforming touch of an energising Spirit.

That knowledge of grace which rejoices in the presence of the Father.

That deep despair that finds comfort and hope in the transcendent cross.

Weeping Over the City:

The city represents the highest in man's creative ingenuity, the summation of his genius.

The city resounds with man's arrogance, his determination to see destiny as the fruit of his evolution.

The city reveals the anxiety of man to actualise the mirage of peace.

The city renders man a slave to technological advance, to mechanistic fanfare, to economic aggression.

The city has yet to recoil under the mighty hand of judgment, but the time is fast approaching.

The Lord is looking for his righteous ones, a remnant, who grieve and lament over the darkness, the oppressive darkness.

Is there anyone who will join with the Lord and weep over Jerusalem?

"Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Oh Jerusalem!

The residue of the city resides in our hospitals, our prisons, our asylums, our pubs, our geriatric homes, our retention centres... and anywhere else that boasts a 'zoo' mentality.

The rubbish of our city envelops disposable humanity: the lame, the blind, the captive, the imprisoned, the slave, the oppressed, the lonely, the destitute, the forgotten.

Through the tears the righteous become aware that they are sheep without a shepherd.

Through the tears the righteous preach the good news to the poor.

The Rain is Falling:

The children of the Lord are wandering aimlessly in a dry land. The vegetation is barely succulent enough to sustain the existence of their ragged flocks and herds. The children are weather beaten, tired, and lethargic. The men are sitting, sprawling, lying, occasionally talking, reminiscing, complaining. The women are industrious, striving to pull together the tattered threads of life. The young are apathetic, disillusioned, resigned to a premature end. The suffering of the hour intensifies with the heat of the day.

Who will look to the Lord in a dry and barren land? Who will praise the Maker of distant horizons and cloudless skies?

I hear a voice, a quiet voice, a voice of hope as pure as a mountain stream singing

Worthy! Worthy! Worthy is the Lamb
The creator of heaven and earth.

A gentle rain is falling
Where did the cloud appear?
I long for eyes to see Him
Whose presence is always near.

He took the sounds of praises
And shaped them like a cloud
He spoke: 'The time is fast approaching.
My children, receive my power.'

The Spirit falls like showers
And saturates the ground
The people are rejoicing
New life is what they have found.

The Unity of Love:

The Lord Has been burning into me the truth that His Kingdom is one humanity. When we sat down to lunch yesterday the reality of our corporate presence was powerful.

A Frenchman, an Englishman, an Irish girl, a Norwegian girl, a Canadian girl, a Swiss guy, and I, an Australian, sharing a meal. My thoughts were full of the far reaching 'love of God,' the fulcrum that gives us equilibrium.

What we need is to discover the richness of our total humanity. We need to open our hearts to welcome the wisdom of our brother, rather than insisting on 'cultural conformity.'

I am discovering that the interaction of culture and traditions exposes a spirit of arrogance which prevents me from welcoming my brother.

What we must cultivate in our lives is a spirit of humility which finds its delight in the unity of love.

The Kingdom of God:

The Kingdom of God had come among us in the beauty of simplicity. It is opening before us like a bud bursting into full bloom. Its sweet fragrance finds release in spontaneous joy, celebration, affection, acceptance, forgiveness, and love.

The Kingdom of God has come among us in the dynamism of diversity. Here is power. The release of the corporate potentiality. The opening of shutters that the light might pour in. The gift of grace offered in humility.

The Kingdom of God has come among us in the unveiling of a universal love.

Love unpretentious, love undiluted, love genuine and true.
Love uncomplicated, love unpolluted, love childlike and new.

The Tragedy of a Middle-Class Mentality:

A middle-class mentality demands comfort.
The ease of fulfilled imaginings
The accessibility of vain dabblings
The gratification of sensuous appetites.

A middle-class mentality insists on conformity.
The fostering of a competitive spirit

The glorification of vocational pursuits
The vision of a solidified humanity.

A middle-class mentality worships competency.
The unquestionable authority of professional services
The unyielding preoccupation with outward appearances
The absolute priority of structural demands.

Let the Little Children Come unto Me:

I went to church
An attractive church
With a steeple, tall like a tree.
The people were charming
Not too alarming
Just nice people, pleasant, you see.
The flowers were colourful
The hymns, well, er, dutiful
The preacher articulate to a tee.
The children were absent
Possibly in the basement
Learning what it is to be.
I looked all around
Not even a sound
It was uncomfortable trying to be me.
The winds of change had recoiled
The Spirit's striving foiled
'A problem of pride,' said He.
I thought of the plight of God's people
The future children of the steeple
I prayed, 'Dear Father, hear my plea,
"Let the little children come to Me."

Condemned Homes:

In Liverpool, there are houses that have labelled 'condemned' by the authorities. The abandoned, derelict buildings are wasting away. No longer is there anyone to care. The broken windows, the barred doors, the cracked walls, the overgrown gardens are a mournful sight. If you pause for a moment, you will hear a deep sobbing.

The impersonal bulldozer terminates the agony, and all that remains is a cloud of dust.

There are homes that are undergoing restoration. The rubble has been cleared away, leaving the shell of the building. The renovating process is preparatory to the coming of new life.

This is the Day:

I wandered from the tranquil place,
And chose the storm where winds embrace.
The blackened clouds their taunt did make,
What are you worth, you miserable fake?

The rains they beat upon my back,
I stoop for cover, by the track.
I am saturated, wet to the skin,
I am sad and despondent, mountains of sin.

I ponder the bleakness of this hour,
Counting the times I have forfeited power.
How can I run and finish the race?
Where is my purity, sanctity, and grace?

He is the Lover, who calls me on,
Listen my child, why struggle alone?
I am the Shepherd, who leads the way,
Follow me, confidently, 'This is the day.'

Walking Up Hope Street:

Liverpool, a predominantly Roman Catholic area, boasts two impressive cathedrals.

The Church of England cathedral, planted on solid rock, is immense in statue and architecturally strong, conveying a powerful sense of permanence and stability. The interior space, free from unnecessary obstructions, invites a respectful quiet, adoration, and awe.

The Roman Catholic cathedral, the fruit of a new age, has a circular sanctuary with the altar central. As your thoughts ascend you meet the beautifully bright colours of the dome – red, yellow, and blue – symbolising presence, inviting exultation and praise.

If you walk between the cathedrals, you travel along Hope Street. The hope of love rejoices in the unity of the Spirit for it no longer matters on which mountain you worship.

The bells toll and the Lord calls.
Who will come?

A Curtain, a Chocolate Bar, and a Candle:

I said: "And what of your people?"

And the Lord said: "Go down to the shop that sell curtains. What is it you see?"

I said: "I see a curtain with two large eyes printed on it."

And the Lord said: "My people have eyes to see and yet they don't see."

The Lord said: "Go down to the milk bar. What is it you see?"

And I said: "I see many different kinds of chocolate bars."

The Lord said: "My people are confused. They are caught in two minds, not knowing which way to choose."

The Lord said: "Go down to the craft shop. What is it you see?"

And I said: "I see a candle burning on its own."

The Lord said: "When my people stand alone, they are vulnerable. Their light could falter. When the lights come together, they support and protect one another."

Impartiality:

One of the underlying themes of the book of Job is 'the impartiality of God.' We imagine that faithfulness to God procures certain privileges, and yet, evil men appear to prosper while the righteous struggle along.

The great danger is that we will completely misinterpret the love of God. How quickly we allow the seeds of bitterness and resentment to take root. In his suffering, Job's friends abandoned him, and those that did show up brought only accusation.

The rejection he experienced came from two sources:

A repulsion of his outward appearance.

An unfounded belief that he had brought this suffering on himself.

1.

2.

The suffering the handicapped experience is not unlike that of Job. There are people who cannot cope with what they see and cover their

embarrassment with a laugh. But the deeper reality is that there are people who cannot come to terms with what they feel. 'Who is the cause of this grotesque being? Who sinned? Let us put them away. They threaten my comfort and prosperity.'

The truth is, God had not abandoned Job. He was the object of God's special love. Similarly, God surrounds the handicapped person with the intimacy of His presence. You see, intimacy is like icing on a cake, the cake of responsibility. There are those who will eat the icing and leave the cake.

When God loves intimately, He acts responsibly and we are formed, layer by layer, into the likeness of Himself. Praise the Lord!

The Light in a Child's Eye:

Who can fathom the depths of Jesus' words when He said, "Except you become as little children you cannot enter into my kingdom?" What is this light which so naturally finds its home in our little ones?

- The life of a little child exhibits carefree spontaneity.
The innocence of a child allows them to make the remark, 'What a funny looking nose you have,' without it being offensive.
Lord, give to your people childlike innocence and the Spirit of spontaneity.
- The life of a little child displays a disconcerting unpredictability.
The unguarded curiosity of a child will always search out the 'forbidden fruit.'
"Do not sit there! Put that down or you will break it! I guess you will have to eat it now seeing you have licked it."
No parent can boast of being able to successfully program the responses of their children. Lord,
give to your people childlike curiosity and the Spirit of unpredictability.
- The life of a little child announces the totality of being.
A child absorbed in play is oblivious to the world around them.
A child devoted to a pet, is capable of unnerving loyalty.
A child has not learnt to give in half measures.
Lord, give your people childlike devotion and a Spirit of abandonment.

Fishers of Men:

Fishing as an art has lured followers over the centuries. When choosing his disciple, Jesus approached hard working fishermen. In commissioning them, Jesus spoke of their call to be 'fishers of men.'

One of the important principles of fishing is that when the fish takes the bait, keep the line taut. Any slackness gives the fish an opportunity to get off the hook.

The Lord is calling His people to be steadfast, to be diligent in reaping the harvest, and to persevere until completed.

A New Love:

The Lord is weaving into my life a new love.

A love which is unashamed to affirm the lovely and unlovely.

A love which accepts my brother as my brother.

A love which forcefully declares the work of the Spirit in unifying people of all races.

A love which is prepared to take risks in healing the wounds of suspicion and bitterness.

A love which is gentle and tender, never brazen or rough.

A love which looks deeply into the heart and sees the unshed tear.

A love which respectfully supports the restless striving to be.

A love which understands the unknowable by its willingness to be patient and silent.

A love which rejoices in the right wherever it appears.

A love which never loses confidence in the face of a threatening darkness.

A love which welcomes the burnt toast as a serving of roast lamb.

A love which is prepared to suffer humiliation and rejection for Him.

The Love of the Father:

The love of the Father welcomes

The love of the Father searches
for a way into every heart.

The love of the Father finds release
in a song

in a word

in a walk along a country road.

The love of the Father
calls gently,
waits patiently,
forgives gladly.
The love of the Father is freely given.
The love of the Father fills the
quietness with a song.
Listen!

In Search of Truth:

Truth that is possessive
denounces freedom
diffuses creativity
embalms beauty
sterilises love
diminishes hope
denies personhood

Truth that is possessive
insists on passivity
demands the renunciation
of all that is conflicting,
applauds the acquisition
of a 'sponge like' mentality,
ushers in a society of
programmed thinkers.

Truth that is possessive
kills brutally, violently,
unmercifully

Truth that is liberating finds
expression in the person of Jesus.

In submitting uncompromisingly to the will of the Father,
Jesus was free to love.

Truth without love is
an ugly dagger
a potent drug
a fatal blow.

Moments of Intimacy:

Moments of intimacy are times of formation. When the mother bird sits on her eggs, the warmth of her presence causes the embryo to grow and to take shape.

Moments of intimacy revive the drooping spirit. The morning dew brings a freshness to the sunbaked grass.

Moments of intimacy heal the deep wounds of rejection. The smell of the pigsty did not stop the father's welcoming embrace.

Moments of intimacy inspire new hope. The lonely sailor, hearing the squawk of the seagull, knows land is near at hand.

Moments of intimacy create beauty. The trusting flower open her delicate petals to receive warmth and light from the sun.

The Marble Statues:

In the London Museum you will find a beautiful display of white marble statues. They testify to the sensitive eye of the craftsman. Every bone, every muscle, every sinew, every fibre is skillfully shaped and finds its rightful place. What was once a jagged hunk of rock has assumed a genuine purpose and destiny. There is a danger in allowing what is evident to the eye to overshadow the sweat and tears that accompanied the creation.

There are times when we look at our brother and sister and forget that they are rock in the hands of the Master Craftsman.

Sometimes, when we reflect on our own roughness, we wrongly conclude that we are unsuitable. The uniqueness of each sculpture is born out of sacrificial love which perseveres until the work is complete.

The Squirrel in Kensington Gardens:

As I was sitting eating my lunch on a bench in the Kensington Gardens, a squirrel came down out of a tree, scurried across the ground, picked up a scrap of food and began to eat it. When he had finished, he ran across the grass, tail bobbing in the air, and scampered up the trunk of another tree.

The Lord opened my eyes to see that this little creature owned nothing and yet the whole ark was his playground; he cultivated no crops and yet there was always food on his doorstep; he built no homes and yet the trees protected him from the wind and rain; he knitted no jumpers and yet he wore a furry coat.

The squirrel understood his mission. He must find a wife, have children, address their needs, and play with them on the green grass. The Lord told him that if he proved faithful, he would not have to worry about houses and land, food, and clothing.

On the Steps of the Liverpool Museum:

Steps are a rugged precipice to the fearful and insecure. The ascending tiers seem insurmountable as I grovel on the dirty pavement. If only I could make one giant leap, if only someone would take me in their arms and carry me to the top.

Hands and knees, an inch at a time, but the world is always moving, and I am afraid I will fall. The crippling fear digs in deeper, and I wish the ground would open and swallow me, thus bringing an end to my misery. The handrail offers relief but the accusing eyes smack at my weakness.

The handicapped person needs the affirmation of presence when their footing is shaky, and they are looking for somewhere to hide.

The Kingdom Has Come Among Us:

The Kingdom of God is present in the life of the powerless. When Jesus gave prominence to a little child He was speaking profoundly of the Kingdom. 'The way I have chosen is a life of dependence. Who will follow?

Handicapped people know what it is to be dependent. They face situations where they have need of someone to share in their weakness. It might be a shoelace that has knotted, or a hole in their sock that needs darning, or a cut finger that requires taping.

Here is a mystery. The Lord comes to us in our weakness and offers us His broken body. To share in His suffering is to become like Him.

Jean is a dark-skinned teenage girl with Down Syndrome. In her weakness she powerfully declares the Kingdom, a Kingdom of love, beauty, dance, and order.

A Kingdom of love – Toni had a birthday recently. She is the sort of person who often wears her breakfast on her chin. While we were eating, Jean got up from the table, went over to Toni, and gave her a big kiss on the cheek.

A Kingdom of beauty – Jean spends time at home knitting. Colourful scarves are her specialty. Their uniqueness is unquestionably the blending of bright, contrasting colours. Every rainbow scarf is a sign of hope.

A Kingdom of dance – The trees sway in the breeze, the birds soar on high, the stars twinkle in the sky, and Jean moves to the sound of music. Her body finds a perfect harmony with the pronounced beat. The experience is exhilarating, compelling, and inspiring.

A Kingdom of order – In the evening, Jean diligently sets about arranging the table for breakfast. You will not hear any trumpets and yet, in the morning I feel somehow, appreciative. Life has its framework.

The Ice Cream Man:

The ice cream man visits our area every day. His van is orange, cream, and blue, and displays the different ice creams available. He announces his arrival by playing pre-recorded music. I recognize it as 'Off to work we go.' No matter what the weather, he parks his van and patiently waits for his customers.

Although his activities are harmless, I find myself becoming agitated when I hear him approaching.

It disturbs me that we are no more self-determining than Pavlov's dogs. We have become susceptible to blatant conditioning, succumbing to a life of perpetual self-gratification. We have lost the ability to discern artificiality and deception.

A Song in the Trees:

I was lying on the ground looking up into the trees. The sun was shining and making me feel drowsy. The wind was blowing, and I could hear the leaves singing. The strength of the wind determined the volume. As the wind fell away, the song became quieter.

The music was compelling, disconcertingly unpredictable under the direction of the Spirit who knows the ways of the wind. All I could do was listen.

God is listening.

A Case of Rejection:

During are childhood, there are experiences which convey a sense of rejection. It may come in the form of an affirmation of a quality you have yet to really understand or accept.

"You're a quiet boy."

It may come as a bold announcement of a physical feature that sets you apart as being a little but different.

"Did you know you have grey hair?"

It may come as a sharp sword exposing your incompetence to compete with your peers.

"You can't swim very well."

It may come as a feeling of loss, left on the shelf.

"Where were you on Saturday?"

It may come as a word of condemnation for something done in innocence.

"Did you do that?"

It may come as a look of disbelief that you are who you are.

The Lord wants to meet us in our rejection. He wants to assure us that we are worthy of being his son.

Before this can happen, there needs to be an awareness of the arrows imbedded in our flesh.

There needs to be a willingness to endure the pain of having the arrows removed.

There needs to be an openness to have the wounds washed and dressed.

An awareness, a willingness, an openness to prepare the way for the coming of 'wholeness.'

"Arise and walk!"

Diana, Goddess of the Night:

To court intimacy with the darkness is to commit an adulterous act.
The seclusion of the night seduces the weakened spirit.

Diana wants to greet the weary and despondent. Her light is deception, for she casts a shadow of distrust. She is a silhouette of hope, but death clings to her skirts. She calls from the open window, but her embrace escapes the suitor's ardent desire.

Gullible men have lost their moorings in the pit of knowing. Stand then in the light.
Surrender your ambitions for the forbidden.

External Conformity Versus Internal Confession:

To confess Jesus as Lord is to stand with the radicals and subversives who reject political, social, and economic oppression.

To confess Jesus as Lord is to risk personal reputation and material comfort in the pursuit of justice, mercy, and truth.

To confess Jesus as Lord is to respect the light and love that resides in the heart of those who would want to kill you.

To confess Jesus as Lord is to remain true to your calling and tireless in self-criticism.

To confess Jesus as Lord is to look for a way that tempers the violent storms with a tranquil presence.

The Prowling Lion:

Satan is dangerous. He is always lurking in the shadows. He curbs his eagerness to pounce, waiting a more favourable time. He can exploit our carelessness and blasé attitude. He is alert to the slightest deviation in our commitment or purpose. He capitalizes on our feelings of uncertainty and estrangement.

He offers a bait – inviting
He plants a thought – implicating
He employs subtle persuasion – indoctrinating
He strives to gain entry – a thought, a desire, an action, a cloud of guilt, an aching sense of aloneness, a loss of hope, disillusionment, death.

Success goes to his head. He no longer concerns himself with camouflage. Blatant aggression replaces a brackish discreteness. He becomes incensed and bares his teeth.
But do not be afraid
Call his bluff
Confront him
Condemn him
and command him to go.
“We are more than conquerors through Christ who strengthens us.”

The Place of Privilege:

To stand with the handicapped is to stand in the place of privilege. They are the Lord's anointed in this hour. If we will take the time to listen to their silent witness, we will hear truth in all its beauty and majesty.

Untouched by the sophistication of a plastic world, handicapped people celebrate the flow of life from rugged mountain peaks to rolling open seas. Theirs is a dance in the courts of the King. To hell with lies and pretense. The bridegroom awaits his bride.

Love and beauty, love and simplicity, love, and peace.

Idealism:

Idealism is not something to be afraid of. Idealism is not condemning, for only the law condemns.

The new covenant is a relationship of love wherein we realise our freedom. Coercion has no part in communion.

Idealism calls, encouraging us to walk a new way.

Idealism is the inner substance of hope. Without it, we would drift like discarded flotsam on the open sea.

Idealism challenges us to a life of constant review where nothing simply exists.

Idealism shakes us from complacency.

Idealism humbles us, for it shows us where we really are.

Idealism illumines the way.

Secure in the Rock:

There is a longing within everyone for security, a sense of permanence and stability. A little child may become attached to a dolly or blanket which they hold on to tightly when feeling threatened.

Security is protection, shielding the unpleasant. A little sparrow will look for safety in the branches of a tree when disturbed by a loud noise.

Security is essential to survival. Without the knowledge of a place of refuge we are torn apart by fear.

The danger of living in a transient world is that we build around our existence, walls of false security.

Thwarted in our quest for solid ground, we may feel compelled to create our own asylum.

There are three illusions of security.

1. The security of responsibility:

The desire to feel wanted is genuine. To imagine that we are indispensable is quite another thing. It is tragically easy to lose ourselves in what we are doing. To bury our identity in a mountain of activity is a high price to pay for a contrived sense of wellbeing.

2. The security of relationships:

The call to love our brother is profoundly right. We are born into relationship, created for community. However, we place an intolerable burden on our friends if our demands for affirmation are constant.

Love is always a gift. You cannot squeeze it out like water from a sponge. To relax our hold on people may expose our trembling knees.

3. The security of reputation:

As people share in your life, they form certain expectations about the way you dress, or relax, or act. We have in our power the means of creating in their minds an image of what may or may not be, a true representation of our authentic self. In time we no longer need to think about what we do. It all comes naturally. We have conformed to a prefabricated identity. We have forfeited our right to self-determination. We have become a blob.

Liberty awaits everyone who discovers that 'Jesus is the Rock.'

Redeeming the Fruit:

I have spent the morning peeling and slicing apples that have fallen from our tree. It must cause a fruit tree great sorrow to see her fruit lying at her feet, abandoned, bruised, and grub infested.

A fruit trees calling is to bear good fruit.

As I was chopping up the apples, separating the good from the bad, I could see, in part, what the Lord is doing with me.

In seeking to preserve my continued usefulness, He is removing from my life all that speaks of death and decay.

When I finished preparing the fruit, I stewed the good pieces of apple and threw the rubbish on the compost heap. We made delicious apple pies with the fruit.

If we entrust our lives to the Lord, He will redeem us and make something beautiful.

Humility in Suffering:

I have had an acute pain in the base of my spine. It becomes even more pronounced when I sneeze but fortunately that is not very often. Although I am comfortable when sitting down, I need to slowly unwind to stand up. I am unable to straighten my body and find myself lurching forward. It has been an infuriating experience and I cannot even boast of a spectacular fall to cause the inconvenience. It happened when I went to get up out of a chair.

It surprises me how self-conscious I am of my suffering, particularly having spent the last two months living with handicapped people, people who experience such obvious suffering.

Could it be that in coming to accept their wounded bodies, my brothers have acquired a deep appreciation humility?

You see, our suffering provides an opportunity for the grace of humility to grow.

Leadership:

Leadership is essential if community is to hold together.

- Leadership cannot rest. It must be energetic in its striving to realise the hope.
- Leadership cannot afford the luxury of detachment.
- Leadership needs to experience the hum drum of life.
- Leadership knows how to soar like an eagle.
- Leadership retains a buoyancy amid turbulent seas.
- Leadership experiences the fires of testing to prove its trustworthiness.
- Leadership is tried and tested, proving its strength and dependability.
- Leadership carries the suffering of the weakest member of the community.
- Leadership creates structures to facilitate the desire for freedom and truth.
- Leadership rejoices in the song of the oppressed.

10p for a Cuppa Tea:

The preacher reminded us of the deep sadness the Lord feels when we reject His love. The choice to love is a choice to suffer, for in freely giving we leave ourselves open to rebuff.

On leaving the train an elderly lady with a hunched back asked me to carry her case to the ticket barrier. I was glad to assist as I could see she was unable to cope. Love touches us when we are prepared to admit our weakness. As it turned out, I accompanied her to the taxi stand. Love walks a second mile.

Two drunks approached me as I waited at the bus stop. Their appearance was dirty and scruffy. One man had a badly bruised eye.

He took hold of the wooden cross hanging around my neck, looked into my eyes, and said, "10p for a cuppa tea." The thought crossed my mind, "Mister, you have had too many drinks tonight."

I stood my ground, looked into his eyes, and said, "No!" For a moment I thought he might rip off my cross and punch me in the stomach. His friend intervened and said, "It's your choice, but I don't think you are fit to wear a cross."

Love looks beyond the superficial and listens to the cry of the heart.

Love knows that the desire for money conceals a much greater need – the need for love.

Love can withstand the anger and frustration of a desperate soul.

Love looks with compassion and feels a deep hurt when the unloved wander aimlessly away.

Love prays for the unloved that they might encounter the Light.

A Young Hedge:

In Belair Park you will find a sample of old trees that are leaning to one side. It is possible that early in their life they grew unprotected and had to contend with the strong, menacing winds on their own. The cost is most evident in a loss of grandeur. Gone is the possibility that they will ever stand erect, for the harshness of life has left a permanent scar.

Not far away a hedge is growing. It is still quite small, but the young trees look healthy. A wind break minimises the damaging effect of a violent wind. The young trees find support in their mutual presence and know that their ultimate purpose can only be arrived at jointly.

A hedge speaks of communality, for there is a willingness to have their shape determined by another.

A Mother Swan:

A mother swan, majestic and white, sits peacefully on a nest of sticks and feathers, built in a quiet and secluded part of the lake. She dips her beak into the water to quench her thirst and rests her weary head on her soft, feathered back. Her focus is on the eggs nestled beneath

her. She knows her loving presence will ensure her young thrive and grow to adulthood.

She has built her nest out of the reach of little boys and would be predators to ensure the safety and security of her little ones. She is a wise mother for she knows that maturity is being willing to accept responsibility.

Caring for the Lambs:

As I was praying this morning the Lord impressed on me how we need to protect our children, to encircle them with love, to build a fortress around them.

We must take every precaution to see that Satan does not have an opportunity to seduce them. It is not for sheep or lambs to be worried about savage wolves, but it is certainly the concern of the shepherds. The cry of God's heart at this moment is for shepherds, for people who are prepared to accept the responsibility of being guardians of the flock.

To be a shepherd implies a willingness to lead. Sheep left to themselves will wander everywhere and have no resourcefulness in the face of danger. A shepherd needs to know what experiences are good for his flock. There is a time for eating and a time for sleeping and a time for playing on the grassy slopes.

To be a good shepherd implies a knowledge of the dangers that threaten the wellbeing and security of the sheep. While avoidance is preferable, unexpected dangers must be dealt with. A shepherd knows how to defend, to deter, to defeat every challenge and to be strong even in the face of death.

To be a good shepherd implies a consuming passion to preserve the unity of the flock. Challenging, correcting, and calling are all part of the mandate to love.

It is costly being a shepherd because you cannot rest if there is a little lamb caught in the prickly bush.

The Hawk and the Prophet:

A hawk hovers in the sky, searching the ground for the slightest movement. His sharp eyes are alert to any rustling of the grass. He hunts the small and unobtrusive. The unsuspecting field mouse is

defenseless, clutched by his sharp, piercing claws. The hawk is a bird of prey.

A prophet is like a hawk. He stands apart from the tangled web of society and to look with the eyes of wisdom and understanding. He is sensitive to the little things and speaks words that penetrate deeply. He is a man of prayer.

Death in the Forest:

It is in the shadows you will find a spider spinning his web. Any careless insect becomes entangled, his end guaranteed.

Brightly coloured toadstools are pushing their way through the carpet of leaves. Their appearance is deceptive as they are poisonous and may prove fatal if eaten.

There is a dampness in the forest and the smell of rotting wood. Decay has set in. Death is ever present.

"Jotham built... forts and towers in the forest." 2 Chronicles 27:4

The Lord is calling His people to be a refuge and a lookout. A refuge for the old, the poor, the wounded, the rejected, the outcast, the oppressed.

A lookout to warn of the approaching danger and to summon each one to get ready for battle, for there is death in the forest.

A Tree Planted by the Water:

As I stood on the edge of the lake in Belair Park, I noticed the mass of roots that lay beneath the surface of the water, providing a continual source of life to the trees and shrubs nearby. I remembered the psalm which talks about the good man being like a tree planted by the water.

Daniel was a man with his roots in the water. He had an impressive understanding of submission and authority. He had resolved the tension that will surely arise between our allegiance to the state and our commitment to God. His service to the state was unavoidable as his people were in captivity. He fulfilled his duties with high distinction and never wavered in his determination to be a responsible citizen.

However, he maintained an uncompromising stance in his devotion to the Lord. This touched on his eating habits, his disciplined prayer life,

and his willingness to declare before Kings the strong words of God as revealed to him in dreams. The strength of his faith had considerable influence on the attitude of the state to his God. The Lord protected him and brought him great honour in the presence of his enemies.

The Vision of the Bulbs:

While I was watching Marguerite plant daffodil bulbs in a plastic container, I remembered an experience I had over twelve months ago. I had offered friends my help in digging over their flower garden. In one of the beds, I planted bulbs – daffodils, jonquils, hyacinths, and others. At the time I was concerned that the tall, overhanging trees might provide too much shade.

That evening, the Lord spoke to me about the bulbs. He said that despite the unfavourable conditions, the bulbs would grow into beautiful flowers that would last the year round. Their presence would command respect and their value appreciated.

The Tallest Trees Catch the Most Wind:

Nehemiah knew in his heart what the Lord wanted for His people. Deeply moved by the agony of his brothers and sisters. His conquest took him into the spiritual arena, placing his own personal safety in jeopardy. He came face to face with the powers of darkness. He stood against the winds of destruction and proclaimed a message of peace and safety in the Lord.

The opposition he encountered varied.

- Derision: Mockery and laughter undermine, challenging the credulity of any plan. Derision can appear to reduce the profoundest thoughts to pulp.
- Accusation: And what is it to be subversive? To be a political activist, intent on unsettling the status quo, is to invoke the wrath of the authorities. The powerful acquire increasing measures of possessiveness and become edgy at the slightest ripple.
- Realism: There are always sceptics in the crowd whose words have a monotonous predictability. "It cannot be done." The light of dawn conquers every mountain.

- Inferiority: Small is exceedingly beautiful. There is a mystery here. The Lord finds delight in the little things. Personal resourcefulness is secondary when the Lord is present. He is committed to rediscovering the discarded stone. Ingenuity triumphs over inadequacy.
- Violence: Fear erodes confidence and gives birth to irrational thought. Fear quickens the desire to cease work and seek security.
- Rubble: The mess infuriates. The muddle aggravates. The mission coagulates.
- Injustice: The inequalities of the present give birth to dissension. Compassion listens to the accusations and forges stronger bonds of unity through the constant striving for equality.
- Alliance: There are parasites who feed off the prosperous. There are vultures who devour the victorious. The smallest termite can weaken the tallest tree.
- Compromise: Submitting to the pressure to acquire the unnecessary, to acknowledge the unsubstantiated, to accommodate the unreliable.

The Leaves Are Falling:

The trees are shedding their colourful coats in favour of a less appealing protective shield to preserve their life against the harshness of winter. The carpet of leaves on the ground speaks of a life that is changing.

The days are evil, and we would do well to clothe ourselves in the armour of God. Now is not the time for a foolhardy boldness, but for the thoughtful mustering of all our energies. The harshness of winter is a reality we cannot escape, and our survival is dependent on our readiness to surrender all the bespeaks death.

The Sacredness of Every Tree:

Father, loving Father,
 You come to us in our weakness.
 You comfort us when we feel alone.
 You assure us of your presence
 a living presence
 a healing presence

Lord, speak Lord,
Come with words of hope
Tell again of your readiness
 to forgive and restore
Heal the cry of my heart
 indistinct
 wavering
 pitiful
Have mercy.

Blessed Spirit, revered Spirit
Do not cut me down
Allow me to grow tall
To be a shelter
 a home for the little ones
The despised
 The rejected
 The weak and powerless
The life I now live in the flesh
I no longer live for myself
 I live for Jesus.

