

Helping Young People Grow in Faith in Jesus Christ

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Thank you for this invitation to speak this evening. In my book, the theme we shall consider evening is one of great importance; indeed, it's of the greatest importance. For me, nothing matters more than to pass on faith in Jesus to others and to our young people most of all.

The issue of young people and faith in Jesus is a presently a cause of some anxiety, much anguish and considerable sadness to many. Among the concerns of the people I meet when visiting schools and parishes, the issue of young people and their faith in Jesus Christ ranks first of all. Whether talking casually outside church after Sunday morning mass; or meeting, in the street or on a bus, the mother of a young man whom I once taught in school; or even when sitting in the front room of a presbytery preparing a funeral, time and again the conversation turns to the children and how regrettable it is that they no longer regularly practise their faith, if they do at all.

Comments like, "I have three grown-up children, but none of them now go to church" are common and so too are comments like this, "I thought we had brought them up well" and "They all went to Catholic school: I don't understand what happened". Then might come comparisons with the past, "In my day we wouldn't have dreamt of not going to church each Sunday"; and the search for a reason, "Father, why is it they don't seem interested?" and then there's sometimes an expression of guilt as well, "Where did we go wrong?"

I have been a head teacher, the provincial of the Jesuits in Britain and I am now the principal of a university college. In all those roles I have had to be about a great many things. But I am clear, that amidst the many things that need to be done, this matters most: helping people, especially young people, to come to know and love Jesus, to come to an active and engaged faith in him.

I'd like to begin by explaining why this evening's theme matters to me and precisely what it is about it that matters so much. But before I get underway, I should explain by way of apology that my pastoral experience with young people is somewhat limited, primarily to schools and more recently to a university. I referred a moment to having to be about many things and that has been especially the case this past week, so I regret you may find that what follows is not as clear as I would hope and you would hope. If that turns out to be the case, please accept my apologies.

So why does faith in Jesus matter so much?

Pope Benedict was a “master teacher” – many people talk of him that way, just think of the widespread attention his three encyclicals attracted (“Deus Caritas Est”, “Spe Salvi”, and “Caritas in Veritate”), or the impact he made when speaking in Westminster hall in 2010 about the role of faith in a secular society. But Pope Francis strikes me above all as an expert spiritual director. In what he writes and perhaps above all in what he says, - not least in his homilies at morning mass in the Casa Santa Marta – the Pope is concerned to advise us about how we can go about following Jesus, being a disciple of Jesus in our daily lives, fully, honestly and lovingly.

For example, you may have noticed that he often writes and speaks about the importance of “memory” in the life of a disciple, specifically, the importance of cultivating a grateful memory.

He says we are to be like Mary and store up in our hearts those moments when we have sensed the presence of the Lord operating in our lives, be it through the people we meet, through the events that happen to us or in the conversations people have with us and we have with them.

He says we should often return in our memories to these events because these are memories of a special kind, of moments when the Lord has encountered us and when we remember them, the Lord is present again and encounters us again.

In his apostolic exhortation, “*Evangelii Gaudium*”, the *Joy of the Gospel*, the Pope calls this a “deuteronomic memory”. Why? When we remember how the Lord encounters us we are like Moses who, in the Book of Deuteronomy, recalled how God acted to free Israel from slavery and remembering those events in the way he did makes them present again.

Here is a memory which I treasure and to which I return often.

A good many years ago, to be honest, more than thirty years ago, I was a Jesuit student for the priesthood, a “scholastic” as we are known after making our first vows and before we are ordained priest. I was studying history at Oxford University while based at our house of studies, *Campion Hall*, a place some of you may have come across. All Jesuits have a spiritual director, or a “spiritual father” as we used to say. Mine at that time was one Fr Anthony Meredith. He was until recently a member of the parish staff at Farm Street Church and is now retired in our community house on the south coast in *Boscombe* near *Bournemouth*. When I was at *Campion Hall*, he was a young and vigorous member of the University’s theology faculty.

The task of the scholastic’s spiritual director is never an easy one. During the many long years of study, prayer tends to be dry and one of the spiritual director’s main jobs is to encourage the young men to persevere - to “keep on keeping on”, as one of

our novice masters use to say was the secret of Jesuit life! Fr Anthony's style was well suited to encouragement: he was and remains a warm-hearted and perceptive listener with a knack of speaking in a way that can put new heart into those who come to him for advice.

I remember well how on one occasion, I asked him if he could recommend a book for spiritual reading. He suggested I take from the library a copy of *The Door Wherein I Went*, Lord Hailsham's, Quentin Hogg's, spiritual autobiography. His suggestion surprised me rather. At that time Lord Hailsham was the Lord Chancellor and I didn't associate spiritual autobiographies with politicians. Having said that, I was aware that when Quentin Hogg had been a student at Christ Church, he had come across the road to Campion Hall for conversations with the then Master, Fr Martin D'Arcy. These conversations seem to have brought him back to the Anglican faith he devoutly practised for the rest of his life.

I shall often remember and always be grateful for that moment when Fr Anthony recommended I read that book, one chapter of which has remained for me a powerful source of inspiration ever since. The chapter has the title, "The Utility of Christianity" and in it Lord Hailsham explains why he is a Christian.

His explanation is not so much an intellectual argument; rather, it centres on the person of Jesus. At one point in that chapter he paints a word portrait of Jesus, of Jesus his companion, the one he has come to know as an intimate friend. So important have these words been in helping me meet Jesus and get to know him for myself that I wanted you all to have a copy of what Lord Hailsham wrote (see below, at the end of this paper). I hope you will find some quiet time to read his words and read them over again. I hope too that Jesus will come alive for you as he came alive for me and as he still comes alive for me whenever I read them.

The portrait Lord Hailsham paints is indeed a very compelling one. "Jesus", he writes,

"was irresistibly attractive as a man... I had never thought of a laughing, joking Jesus, physically strong and active, fond of good company and a glass of wine, telling funny stories ... applying nick-names to his friends and holding his companions spellbound with his talk".

He goes on,

"The man whom they crucified was intensely fond of life, and intensely vital and vivacious. He did not wish to die. He was the last person associated with suffering. They called him a wine-bibber. What was it that kept Mary at his feet when Martha was scurrying about getting the dinner? Was it a portentous commentary on Holy Scripture? I feel it was simply that she found his company actually enthralling".

“When one reflects like this”, he continues,

“the picture of Jesus suddenly comes to life. The tragedy of the cross was not that they crucified a melancholy figure, full of moral precepts, ascetic and gloomy....What they crucified was a young man, vital, full of life and the joy of it, the Lord of Life itself, and even more the Lord of laughter”.

And then Lord Hailsham sums up in this way.

“When I am asked about the usefulness of Christianity, I must point to the consolations of living your life in the companionship of this person who commands your love and your adoration precisely because having been through it all and sympathising with it all, he cheers you up and will not have you sad. Your shame at your own misdoings and shortcomings, your sense of awe and fear of the divine majesty, your broken heart in the presence of sickness and bereavement melts in the presence of this person into the sheer wonder and delight which the happiness of his presence excites”.

Neither could I imagine what it would be like living life without the companionship of Jesus, of this Jesus my friend and my brother. What would life be without his word which gives character and shape to my life? What would life be without the Eucharist, the bread that is broken and the wine poured out: which is the love, his love, which I want to place at the heart of my life?

When I think of the many young people who grow up without knowing Jesus in this personal way, the young people whom those parents I meet are so often anxious about, what saddens me most is the fact that they may end up living their lives without him, without walking through life in relationship with him, without knowing his friendship first-hand.

All this explains why for me this question of how we can go about helping young people have faith in Jesus is so important; indeed, its why it's the most important question of all. As the previous superior general of the Society of Jesus, Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, once memorably wrote, “Intimacy with Jesus leads to the desire to share that intimacy with others”.

Helping young people, people of any age, come to faith in Jesus is above all about introducing them to a relationship. Pope Francis understands this. As he says in his *Joy of the Gospel*, quoting Pope Benedict,

“Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

Do you recall Pope Benedict's memorable words in the homily during his inaugural mass in April 2005. He invited everyone present, especially the young people present, to "Open wide the doors to Christ":

"Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is...there is nothing more beautiful than to know him, than to speak to others of our friendship with him. The task of the shepherd, the fisher of men, can often seem wearisome. But it is beautiful and wonderful, because it is truly a service to joy, to God's joy which longs to break into the world."

The sadness is that too many live without this relationship and this explains for me why helping young people grow in faith, helping them come to this relationship, is a matter of great importance and of great urgency.

But if this relationship is so attractive, then why is it, you may ask, there is an issue with young people and faith?

Now, lest you get indigestion from my too many words, I'll pause every so often to give you either time for reflection or for a conversation with your neighbour. So before I attempt to answer that question, let's have our first pause. Here's a question to think about out loud with your neighbour. I have spoken to you about my memory of Fr Tony Meredith and the book he recommended I read all those years ago.

Do you treasure the memory of someone who introduced you to a relationship with Jesus?

So why aren't more young people growing up actively believing in Jesus Christ?

The question is most often put to me like this, "With so many students in so many Catholic schools, how come we see so few of them at mass in church on Sundays after the age of about 14?"

Very often, it is the quality of religious education and religious formation in all these Catholic schools that is called into question. Now, I would not doubt that improvements could always be made, but from my perspective as a former head teacher and as a current member of the Westminster Diocesan Education Commission, I do not think the blame can be placed at the door of sub-standard religious education or formation programmes in schools.

The Westminster education commission receives inspection reports on all its schools, both the OFSTED reports and also the so called "section 48" reports which focus on the quality of religious education and of the "Catholic life of the school". My estimate would be that more than half of the primary and secondary schools receive an "outstanding" for both and it is rare for the others not to be graded at less than "good".

This bears out my personal experience of schools both as a head teacher and as the Jesuit provincial and chairman of a trust with responsibility for a number of schools. In the secondary sector, religious education in all Catholic schools should occupy 10% of the curriculum time and generally it does. It is ordinarily an examined subject at GCSE and is given as much importance as other subjects in the curriculum for 14-16 year olds. The material covered in the GCSE syllabus is typically divided between one or other of the synoptic gospels and a survey of Catholic practices and beliefs. Achievement in this subject at GCSE is in line with and often exceeds that in other subjects.

Furthermore, since the expansion of the sixth form curriculum introduced by the Labour government in 2000, a larger proportion of 16 year-olds in Catholic schools then go on to take “religious studies” or “theology” as one of their four or five AS level choices in the lower sixth and as one of their three full A level choices in the upper sixth.

This increase in 16 to 18 year old students has in turn led to an increase in the number studying theology-related degree courses. However, the combined impact of the emphasis being placed on “employability” as a criterion for the choice of degree courses and of a return to fewer subjects being studied in the sixth form may lead to that trend being reversed. Indeed, there are signs that it already is, which is regrettable.

The last 15 years have also seen an additional focus on out of class religious formation programmes with the appointment in many, possibly most, secondary schools of full-time or part-time lay chaplains.

In short, the issue for me is not so much the quality of the religious education or religious formation programmes in schools; neither is there an issue with the seriousness with which students engage in these programmes; rather the issue for me is the fact that, for whatever reasons, religious education and religious formation, of a high quality, does not “take”. Why not?

Some would attribute the fact that these religious formation and religious education programmes do not have the impact one might expect them to have to the absence of religious practice in the home. In other words, what is taught in schools is not reinforced in the home and sometimes it is undermined by a lack of interest in, even an implicit hostility towards, matters of faith and religion. And there is little doubt that this is sometimes true. Parents in my experience are commonly very happy their children attend Catholic school, happy that their children should be taught religion, and regard the beliefs and values of religion as values and beliefs that they would want their children to live by. But they do not see it as important to practise their religious faith on a regular basis.

Why not? Two reasons especially stand out for me.

In part, I believe it is because there has been something of an erosion of the Church's authority. Students may engage in religious studies classes and do well at GCSE and even A level. But they hold back from engaging personally in what they are being taught, and being taught well, because for them, and the same could be true for their parents, there is something about it all they can't quite accept.

In my view this has less to do with intellectual arguments about the existence of God or about the problem of evil; it is more to do with social attitudes: if you like, there is a mismatch. I don't mean so much a mismatch between what the Church teaches and what it practises, as has been evidenced in the child abuse scandals, though this is problematic, as we know; I mean rather that there is a lack of coherence between what the Church teaches and the commonly accepted personal and social values which are commonly regarded in our culture as "good".

For example, young people and their parents are marked by what is in most ways an admirable tolerance of others – of people of the other gender, of other faiths, of other races and of other nationalities, of other sexual orientations and of those living in relationships other than marriage. Such tolerance is regarded as "good" and is regarded as the foundation of a socially cohesive society which is also regarded as good. But in so far as the Church qualifies its acceptance of the equality of women and cannot fully include the divorced and remarried in its community and is critical of homosexual life-styles, its authority is eroded in the eyes of our young people and their parents who have absorbed other social values which they regard as "good". Consequently, as I see it, they hold back from a commitment to, from full engagement with those quality religious education and the religious formation programmes they are offered.

How would Pope Francis the master spiritual director assist these young people who are responding to what they are taught in this way? In his apostolic exhortation, the *Joy of the Gospel*, I read him as responding thus. He doesn't respond with reasoned argument or by explaining more clearly whatever teaching it is that these young people and their parents have problems with. Rather, he invites them to an encounter with Jesus, to experience Jesus, to come to know Jesus personally as their friend and companion. It's this encounter, and the relationship which comes about because of this encounter, which will mean they want to engage with what they learn at school because it then becomes personally significant for them. Their questions and difficulties will not necessarily go away. But they will learn to read those questions and difficulties through the lens of this relationship, which helps them put their questions and difficulties in perspective, as it does for many of us.

The second reason why the message of the Gospel does not take is that many young people's hearts have gone elsewhere – they have been captured by consumerism which, for Pope Francis, is the principal obstacle to faith in the world today. As he writes in the *Joy of the Gospel*:

“The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor, God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it...” (2)

But what is it about consumerism that brings about these effects?

I wonder if you know of a book by a Fr John Kavanaugh, a Jesuit based for many years in St Louis University, called “Following Christ in a Consumer Society”. As an introduction to contemporary culture that makes sense and resonates with experience, I have found it second to none and it is well worth a read.

The point he wants to make is that we are dominated by the culture of consumerism, of profit-making and the commercial economy. This culture is all-embracing: “It doesn’t just affect the way we shop”, he writes, “it affects the way we think and feel, the way we love and pray, the way we evaluate our enemies, the way we relate to our spouses and children. It’s systematic”. Indeed, he continues, it’s so systematic, so much part of the way we are, the way we do things, that it seems to most of us, most of the time, as though there is no alternative.

This all-embracing consumerist culture says that things don’t have value in themselves, they have value outside themselves, in their usefulness for achieving certain ends; and not just things but people too. It teaches people that their value lies outside themselves, not in themselves as they are but outside themselves as they might be if they only had x or looked like y. “This is the relentless message”, writes Kavanaugh, “that assaults the self-worth and perceptions of millions: your hair is too long, your hair is too short; your skin is too light or too dark; you are too fat, too thin.”

It is my experience that the aspect of contemporary culture that challenges the faith development of young people more than any other is the message of consumerism, directed through advertising so pointedly at their age group. Happiness and fulfilment are within their grasp and lie in having this and having that, in how they look and what they wear, their style and their image. The culture of consumerism teaches them as it teaches us all to live on the surface of things rather than to face up to the deeper questions of life that rise up from life’s deeper experiences. It inoculates or anaesthetises them and all of us against tragedy and pain, against sickness and death, against those experiences where faith begins to have meaning, where faith begins to “take”.

How does Pope Francis the master spiritual director respond to young people who are caught up in this way in the culture of consumerism? Once again, he invites them to an encounter with Jesus, to experience Jesus, to come to know Jesus

personally, in the knowledge that it is in this encounter that they will truly find the fulfilment they look for in possessions, in style or in status.

All of which explains why his apostolic exhortation - which is about evangelisation, about helping people in today's world, young people included, to come to and grow in faith in Jesus - begins with an invitation to encounter the Lord and it is why the Pope refers to this encounter some twenty times in this exhortation. He tells us that the overall purpose of what he has written is to

“... invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her... The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms”(EG 3)

So if we can understand what the Pope means by this encounter, we can identify ways in which young people might be helped to experience such encounters and thereby grow in faith.

But before we do that, let's have a second pause.

A moment ago, I said this: “In my experience the aspect of contemporary culture that challenges the faith development of young people more than any other is the message of consumerism”. Do you agree?

Young People and the Encounter with Jesus

What does Pope Francis mean by an encounter with Jesus?

Many are those who, like me, have written about this Jesuit Pope's roots in the missionary spirituality of St Ignatius who regarded the people, the conversations and the events of daily life as opportunities for an encounter with the Lord. As the Pope himself writes, we learn “to find Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas” (EG 91). And as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in his poem *As Kingfisher's catch fire*:

.... for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

But less well known is the influence which Mgr. Luigi Giussani, the founder of the lay movement “Communion and Liberation” has had on Pope Francis. As Cardinal, he often spoke at the movement's conferences. “For many years now”, wrote

Bergoglio some 12 years ago, “his writings have inspired me to reflect and have helped me to pray. They have taught me to be a better Christian”.

Giussani held, rather as did St Augustine, that all human beings are restless and searching until they find the answers to the ultimate questions they ask about their existence - questions about the meaning of human life and death, of evil and good, of our final destiny—until they find the love which satisfies their deepest longing for love. It is when we begin to encounter Christ and his Gospel that we begin to encounter the truth that answers our questions, the love that satisfies our longings and also the beauty surpassing all beauty. “We were created for what the Gospel offers us”, writes the Pope in the *Joy of the Gospel*, “friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters” (EG 265).

Because we find in this encounter all that human beings look for and long for, it is in this encounter we begin to experience a joy, a joy of a particular kind – the “joy of the Gospel” – a joy so profound we just must share it with others. As Pope Benedict expressed it, in Christ,

“All the anguish and all the longing of the human heart find fulfilment. The joy of love, the answer to the drama of suffering and pain, the power of forgiveness in the face of an offence received and the victory of life over the emptiness of death: all this finds fulfilment in the mystery of his Incarnation, in his becoming man, in his sharing our human weakness so as to transform it by the power of his resurrection.”

No need for proselytism, enthusiastic evangelising crusades, which, says Pope Francis is “solemn nonsense”. Rather, it is this joy that draws others to Christ and his Gospel, so infectious, so attractive is the joy they encounter.

As we recognize in our encounter with Jesus the truth and love of our lives, so we want to model our lives on his life – living as he lived, with his values and his attitudes and with what the Pope calls “the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ”, with a community of faith to support us, and knowing we have a meaning and a goal in life (EG 49). In other words, we grow in relationship with him. Jesus becomes as Quentin Hogg knew him to be, a companion and a friend.

So how might we shape our work with young people around all that Pope Francis has to say about this encounter with Jesus?

Firstly, we can help young people understand themselves as people with these questions and longings to which an encounter with Jesus and his Gospel are the answer. Put another way, we present Jesus and his Gospel in ways that make clear that he responds to the questions, the longings of all humanity.

Twelve years ago, Cardinal Bergoglio expressed these questions in this way - "Why is there pain, why death, why evil? Why is life worth living? What is the ultimate meaning of reality, of existence? What sense does it make to work, love, become involved in the world? Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?" Then he goes on, "By not asking them of ourselves and of our fellows, we cease to be what we are". And the sadness for him is that many human beings never ask the question to which Jesus and his Gospel are the answer.

Secondly, we can offer young people opportunities for an encounter with Jesus. In my experience, outdated as it now is, young people encounter Christ, personally, in three settings in particular: in seeking answers to the questions they ask, certainly; in spirituality, in prayer, in *lectio divina* exercises or in Ignatian contemplation; and perhaps most of all in the service of the poor, whether it be in HCPT Easter pilgrimages or on what are sometimes called "immersion" experiences, such as the project which sixth formers at Wimbledon College were involved in building a school for *dalit* children in southern India. And in particular they encounter Christ in these experiences when they are accompanied by the chance to have guided reflections on these experiences; conversations which encourage such reflection.

Thirdly, we can recognize that the fine work which so many of our schools do in *personal* formation prepares young people for an encounter with Jesus. The kind of people who recognize Jesus are those who are not locked inside their own concerns but who are turned outwards to others; people who have a suspicion that life is to be found in giving life away. In educating our students in human virtue, in caring about the kind of people they are becoming, we are helping them become this kind of people: with ears to hear him when he calls and eyes to see him when he appears in the faces of others; people with the generosity of heart to make a response. Indeed, when Pope Francis spoke to those young people and their teachers from our schools in Italy and Albania back in June, he spoke about the work of these schools as first and foremost being to provide an education in "magnanimity".

Fourthly, we need to recognize that it is the values of consumerism that stand in the way of this encounter. So it is urgent that we find ways of making our young people aware of these values, and encourage them to live differently. At the same time we need to identify, challenge and root out consumerist attitudes in what we might call the hidden curriculum of our schools, lest the work we do in faith formation gets undermined by the consumerist values and attitudes we unreflectively import into our schools.

Finally, we need to recognise that all this is also a challenge to us.

You don't have to read between the lines of the *Joy of the Gospel* to realise that the Pope thinks the Church itself needs to be renewed if it is to be the kind of Church that will attract young people, any people, to a relationship with Jesus Christ. The reasons why young people find it hard to believe are not only to be found out there

“out there”, they are “in here” too. It is evident that he thinks that in some quarters the Church has become stale, formalised and over-involved with its own concerns.

If we are to help young people to come to an encounter with Jesus, we ourselves need to respond to the Pope’s invitation to a “renewed personal encounter with Christ” and then, having encountered him, to find the words to speak of those encounters personally and attractively to others, young people perhaps most of all.

How might we have such encounters? Here are some ideas:

- Walking through life with our ears and our eyes open, with an openness to being encountered: adopting what the Pope calls a contemplative attitude
- Looking out for Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their suffering, in their pleas
- Attentive reading of the gospel or *lectio divina*, “contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart” (EG 264)
- Spending time alone before the Blessed Sacrament, or before a crucifix, “asking (the Lord) to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence” (EG 264)
- Listening to well-prepared homilies from a preacher so familiar with the Word that he speaks about what he himself has seen and heard (EG 150)
- Engaging in conversations where we explore those fundamental questions, identify our longing for love and for all-surpassing beauty.

I want to leave you with a final thought about the advice Pope Francis, the spiritual director, might give to the many people who are worried and anxious about the faith or the lack of it of their young people.

My overriding impression of Pope Francis is of a man of hope which is born of a conviction that the Lord is in control. And he wants us to be the same. He is a man who is not awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit; rather, he is sure the Holy Spirit has been given and is at work amongst us: the power, the energy, the vitality and the inspiration of God. It’s the Holy Spirit who makes these encounters possible; the Holy Spirit who enables us to be the presence of Christ for others, and others for us; the Holy Spirit who enables us to recognise the presence of Christ in others and others in us. So he is confident and we can be confident as well. As the Pope has said, all we need do is what we can – though we must do what we can – and the Holy Spirit will do the rest.

In addition to being confident, we can also be patient. As he says, with respect to young people and their growth in faith, and with respect to so much else, we can “travel in patience”:

“See”, says the Lord, “I am the one who will sort out the story”. So often in life we ought to slow down and not try to fix everything at once! To travel in patience

means these things: it's giving up the hope that we can solve everything; it's making an effort, but understanding that one person cannot do everything and its putting the myth of efficiency into perspective.'

Thank you

Why Be a Christian?

What exactly was Jesus like to meet? If one had been a fellow-guest when he asked himself to dinner with Zacchaeus, or when he was eating with the Pharisee, what sort of a man would one in fact have seen and spoken to? What was his conversation like?

Having asked this question, I looked at the Gospel again, and quite suddenly a new portrait seemed to stare at me out of the pages. I had never previously thought of a laughing, joking Jesus, physically strong and active, fond of good company and a glass of wine, telling funny stories, using as every good teacher does, paradox and exaggeration as among the most effective aids to instruction, applying nicknames to his friends, and holding his companions spellbound with his talk. And yet, it is a very odd thing that one does not think of him in these terms.

Granted that we are told to think of him as having every perfection of human nature, do we not ordinarily regard a sense of humour and high spirits as among the most desirable attributes a man can have? How then can we suppose that he did not have them? As I reflected upon this, I came to the conclusion that the first thing we must learn about him is that we should have been absolutely entranced by his company. Jesus was irresistibly attractive as a man. The man whom they crucified was intensely fond of life, and intensely vital and vivacious. He did not wish to die. He was the last person to be associated with suffering. They called him a winebibber. They abused him for the company he kept. What was it, do you suppose, that kept Mary at his feet when Martha was scurrying about getting the dinner? Was it a portentous commentary on Holy Scripture? I feel that it was simply that she found his company actually enthralling.

When one begins to think of it, can one see anything but fun in calling the two enthusiastic brothers 'Sons of Thunder' or impetuous, chivalrous, heroic, but often blundering Simon, the Rock? Is there no hint of humour in the foolish virgins, or the unjust steward, or the camel who finds it impossible to get through the eye of a needle, or the comparison of the speck of dust and the great beam in the eye, or the picture of wicked old Tiberius getting back the penny with his ugly old face on it, or the mustard plant likened to a tree, or the trade unionists who complain at the end of the day that someone else has got by with only an hour's work for the whole day's wage? Once one reflects about this, the picture of Jesus suddenly comes to life.

The tragedy of the cross was not that they crucified a melancholy figure, full of moral precepts, ascetic and gloomy. He was not John the Baptist, and the Baptist acknowledged this. What they crucified was a young man, vital, full of life and the

joy of it, the Lord of life itself, and even more the Lord of laughter, someone so utterly attractive that people followed him for the sheer fun of it, someone much more like the picture of Dionysus in a Greek mosaic than the agonized and broken figure in a medieval cathedral, or the Christos Pantokrator of an orthodox monastery. The man of sorrows acquainted with grief was in him-self and before his passion utterly and divinely joyous. The twentieth century needs to recapture the vision of this glorious and happy man whose mere presence filled his companions with delight. No pale Galilean he, but a veritable Pied Piper of Hamelin who would have the children laughing all round him and squealing with pleasure and joy as he picked them up.

When I am asked about the utility of Christianity I must point to the consolations of living your life in the companionship of this person who commands your love and adoration precisely because having been through it all and sympathizing with it all he cheers you up and will not have you sad. Your shame at your own misdoings and shortcomings, your sense of awe and fear of the divine majesty, your broken heart in the presence of sickness and bereavement melts in the presence of this person into the sheer wonder and delight which the happiness of his presence excites.

from "The Door Wherein I Went"
Quentin Hogg, Lord Hailsham