



IT'S ALL ABOUT BECOMING

A LETTER TO SENIOR STUDENTS

From Bishop Peter Cullinane

Kei aku tamariki mokopuna, e hine mā, e tama mā, tukua rā aku mihi aroha ki a koutou katoa.
Kia whakapaingia koutou i tēnei rā, ā hei ngā rā katoa e tū mai nei.

Dear friends on the journey:

At your birth you were no doubt a great little bundle of life. But you were not complete.
Life unfolds. At each moment of your life, you can become more than you were before.

I believe it will be easier for you to experience the wonder and the joys of life, and easier to
navigate its troubled waters, if you understand your life as a process of becoming - in its many
aspects.

Your life is not a chance in the long history of the universe. It is a calling, and it has a purpose.
No other person could ever substitute for you. I hope you to be able to see that, and wonder at
it! Each of us needs to come alive to the miracle of our own life and our place in the universe.

For each of us, our “calling” and our “becoming” are tied in with each other. And, the world we are part of is in the process of becoming. We don’t merely live our life on the planet as if on a stage, until time to exit. We are part of the life of the planet. Our activities, our loving, smiling, laughing, making music, and singing, are all made from the fibres of the planet. In a real sense, the planet finds expression in us.

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Each of us personally contributes to what the planet becomes. There is a contribution to the history of the world that can only come from you. Sometimes people don’t develop their full potential because they don’t quite believe they are special, or that they can make a difference to what the world is like. But God is making “the whole of creation new” (Revelation 21:1-5) and involves us in this! The choices we make, and the things we do, matter that much! What the planet becomes and what you become are linked.

Becoming is a process built into nature. It’s also a personal responsibility. This letter focuses on both – nature’s part and your part. It’s not just about what job or sport you become good at. It’s about *what kind of person* you become. Your life-time is your chance to become the kind of person you would most like to be. You may as well get it right!

Let’s remember too: a universe that is still becoming is still unfinished. And so there are going to be lots of instances of unfinished becoming – imperfections! In an unfinished world they all belong.

In various ways, we are all incomplete. The important thing is that none of the dents and kinks in our lives (the ones we don’t choose) stands between us and God’s love for us.

Pope Francis has recently set two young teenagers on the path to canonization: Alexia Gonzales Barros and Carlo Acutis. Each had been diagnosed with terminal cancer; each rose above their set-back by choosing God’s will over their own; and each offered up their suffering to help others. In that way they lived their lives to the full; they were not defeated by the set-backs of an unfinished life.

It can be like that when we ourselves, or somebody we love, or a good friend, experiences some set-back. It’s easier to talk about our set-backs when we see our lives as part of an unfinished world, and our life as a process of becoming.

The rest of this letter is about the various aspects of becoming that are part of every person’s life. Each aspect of our becoming is part of the bigger picture. Starting with the first, just take only one aspect at a time. You need time to reflect.

What I am sharing with you in this letter is based on the sciences and Christian faith.

“Science without religion is lame;
religion without science is blind.”

Albert Einstein

¹ Modern sciences tell of the physical connectedness of all the planet’s parts. Maori tradition, Christian and other mystics, recognize a kinship between people, the world and God, evoking awe and the need to respect the intimate relationship between kaitiakitanga (caring for creation) and manaakitanga (caring for one another).

BECOMING THROUGH SEEKING TRUTH

Searching for truth sometimes involves a bit of hard work. But it's worth it. Superficial understanding leaves us vulnerable to other people's spin – commercial spin, political spin, agenda-driven ideologies, etc.

Scientists work hard to establish facts. They know we need to act on what is objectively true. Solving crimes, the judicial system, and research in every field are all based on the premise that truth matters. Your studies and exams are based on the premise that true and false are not the same.

All these activities – and most of human life – would be turned up-side-down if it were enough to say: “truth is whatever the individual thinks it is – it's true for her/him” and “right is whatever the individual chooses – it's right for him/her”. Those clichés belong to a way of thinking called “relativism”.

The need for objective truth applies also to the big questions of life. Some activities are true to human nature and some are not. Some are consistent with human dignity, and some are not. That is what the commandments are all about. Some actions are right and some are wrong whether the individual knows it or not.

Judgments about which activities are right and which are wrong are judgments we need to make – otherwise how could we say, for example, that rape is wrong? Not to make such judgments is ultimately not to care.

But judging people's actions is one thing: judging their consciences is another. They may be in good conscience or in bad conscience concerning what they are doing. They may be more blameworthy or less blameworthy or not blameworthy at all. That is why Pope Francis could say: “who am I to judge”? We need to know the difference between judging a person's actions (which we can rightly do) and judging their conscience (which we cannot.)

So too, explaining that some behaviour is wrong, doesn't mean we don't love the people who do it. When Jesus said some behaviours involve exclusion from his kingdom, He wasn't “hating” anyone – in fact He was loving everyone because He wanted all to be included. When parents tell their children that thieving, for example, is wrong, it doesn't mean they don't love their children. And when the Church passes on the teaching of the scriptures, it isn't hating anyone. The paramount law is love. But people who love still need to judge between right and wrong.

Learning the difference, and living the difference, between true and false, right and wrong, is all part of what kind of persons we become. To opt out of judging the difference between true and false, right and wrong, is to remain less than we might have been - and less free. As Jesus said, it is the truth that sets us free!

Let's now rewind to when our becoming started.



BECOMING DURING THE FIRST NINE MONTHS

When you were conceived, there were millions of sperm competing to fertilize a waiting ovum. One did so. Every other combination of sperm and ovum would have been a different person. The one moment in the whole history of the universe when any of them could have come into existence passed at that moment. They will never exist. And at the one moment when you could have come into existence, you did. You might well ask: “why me?” You really are one in a million!.

According to the pioneers of IVF (Edwards and Steptoe), the fertilized ovum is already “a microscopic human being” even before it is implanted. “It becomes magnificently organized, switching on its own biochemistry, increasing in size, and preparing itself quickly for implantation in the womb”.

(A Matter of Life and Death, 1981.)

That is accepted scientific teaching. So when people say the newly conceived is only a part of its mother’s body tissue – and not yet a distinct new human being - they are being unscientific. It’s a glib way of speaking, and usually agenda-driven. When the Church teaches that abortion is wrong, it’s not about control over women! It’s about taking science seriously and about love for the newly conceived child and its parents.



Whatever the circumstances in which your existence began, and whatever the circumstances in which your life will end, you always matter to God. Each of us is personally called into existence, for a wonderful future with God. That’s why human lives are sacred, at every point between conception and natural death.

The womb is the child's first environment, where the wellbeing of the mother can affect the wellbeing of the child. Some health issues arise even before birth; e.g. heart defects, spina bifida, Down syndrome, damage to brain development due to drugs or alcohol taken during pregnancy, etc. (The claim that we are "all born perfect", as a Hollywood star recently said, is just another example of glib non-scientific talk.)² It is wonderful that medical science is able to correct some of these disorders – sometimes even while the child is still in the womb.

We can truthfully name less perfect conditions - which is what we expect of the medical profession, for example. No one is being "judged" or blamed when referring to dyslexia or gender dysphoria or autism or allergies; health and developmental issues are being named. What matters most is that none of these conditions stands in the way of God's love, which is unconditional and the same for each and every one. Moreover, God is working through each one's life – in and through each one's differences. Every person has their own special place in God's unfolding plan.



The ancient psalms were written before the sciences were thought of. They have their own poetic way of saying things:

It was you who created my being,
knit me together in my mother's womb.
I thank you for the wonder of my being,
for the wonders of all your creation.

Already you knew my soul,
my body held no secret from you
when I was being fashioned in secret
and moulded in the depths of the earth...

O search me, God, and know my heart.
O test me and know my thoughts.
See that I follow not the wrong path
and lead me in the path of life eternal. (Ps 139: vv 13-15)

² What God made was a world that is a work in progress. If it had been perfected from the start there would be no time-gap to allow for those things that happen over time - no scope for the exercise of freedom and responsibility; no narrative; no future awaiting things that grow from what they are to what they aren't yet; no life as we know it.

BECOMING THROUGH SEXUAL DIFFERENTIATION

Part of our becoming is the process of sexual differentiation. It begins during our life in the womb, and continues during our formative years. Here too, we take seriously both our faith and the human sciences.

When the parents of a new-born baby delight to tell you they have a baby boy or girl, they know because the baby's biological sex is the basis of its sexual and gender identity. And it's not just the baby's body they are referring to: it is the person of their little boy or girl.

Gender identity is not a label put on us - by others or by ourselves. Common sense tells those parents it is given by nature, long before we start making our own decisions. That's why boys and girls can each enjoy their own gender identity right from their childhood.



Let's acknowledge, though, that some young people feel their gender does not match their biological sex. Scientific research has been helpful: it shows that unease with their gender identity (dysphoria) is usually transitory, and that after puberty they are happy to identify with their biological sex. (This is why parents and others should not reinforce their child's alternative gender during the time of temporary confusion).

Sexual differentiation continues during growing up years in the sense that it involves our psychological and emotional life as well as our biological reality. Awareness of being male is heightened through relating socially with others who are female – and vice versa. The creation story (Genesis ch. 2) ³ tells how sexual differentiation completed our creation as humans: Adam woke up – became more fully himself – when he discovered the creation of Eve as his “other”. Both socially and biologically, male and female find a certain completion in each other. The Genesis story shows how this depends on each being the “opposite” sex to the “other”.

³ Religious truth taught in the form of a story

Sometimes orientation to the opposite sex seems to hesitate, and people pass through a phase of sexual ambiguity, experiencing attraction to the same or both sexes. This is usually just a phase, and is not abnormal. Most grow through this phase to full sexual differentiation.

But sometimes orientation to the same or both sexes becomes permanent. It is for the sciences to determine the reasons for this.⁴ Ultimately, we are all part of a creation that is still groaning in labour pains as it gradually becomes what it is not yet; (Romans 8:22,23). Our lives are part of that. They belong to what already is, but also to what is not yet. That's why there is no such thing as a right to complete fulfillment within our present life-time. But all people, whatever their circumstances, have a right to receive from us a love that is like God's love for them – respectful of difference, inclusive and unconditional.

Sexual and gender identity go deeper than just our social skills. Some social skills and qualities are more predominant in one sex or the other, but they can be inter-changeable. They are learned skills. At a deeper level, masculinity and femininity are rooted in the biological reality of maleness and femaleness. Biological sex, sexual identity and gender identity are all connected and inter-dependent. This is acknowledged even by those who seek surgical intervention to support gender change.

There are differences between people that do not affect their fundamental dignity or equality as persons. Recently, a British comedian (Stephen Amos) on pilgrimage in Rome was really concerned that the Pope might not accept him because he was gay. He said to Pope Francis: "So me coming on this pilgrimage, being non-religious and looking for answers and faith; but as a gay man I don't feel really accepted." The Pope responded that placing more importance on being gay than on being human was a mistake. "We are all human beings and have dignity. Whoever we are, and however we live, we don't lose our dignity as human beings". Amos said he was "blindsided" by the Pope's response; "and so I was in full respect of the man".



The Pope was speaking for the Church. So was the Second Vatican Council when it taught that

"With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intentions." (GS. 29)

⁴ The relevant literature speaks of genetic and hormonal factors (even before birth), or trauma (sometimes during very early childhood). Some psychologists believe that the first sexual experience can have a deep and lasting impact on orientation, and obviously repeated experience would consolidate that orientation. Or it can result from the influence of other people.

BECOMING THROUGH THE CHOICES WE MAKE

Many different things can influence this journey of becoming: e.g. our physical environment, the people around us, economic opportunities or the lack of them, genetic inheritance, etc. But the biggest influence on what kind of person we become is the decisions we ourselves make. We navigate through all the other influences by the choices and decisions we make in the midst of them all. The best evidence for this is people we admire, who in some cases become wonderful people against very big odds. Being disabled in some way, or being poor, didn't stop them from becoming the kind of persons we rightly admire. External circumstances did not take away their freedom to make good choices.

Similarly, aid workers tell us about people who are starving and nevertheless live in quiet dignity and who are incredibly unselfish towards one another. So there are inner decisions that difficult circumstances can't stop us making.



Speaking of choice: you hear people talking about “doing God’s will”. God doesn’t impose on you. In fact, your best hopes for yourself and God’s best hopes for you are the same. When God chose you, God chose what you yourself most deeply want, because that’s part of who you are.

God “wrote” your personal calling into your “heart” and your talents. Your deepest longings and hopes, and even your concerns and anxieties, all point to something beyond what you already are. God has also “written” to you in the circumstances of your life. God’s will involves what you most need to do, and what the world most needs from you. The places where God calls you are the places where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.



This means making decisions and choices. Every person’s journey sooner or later meets cross-roads – when choosing one direction excludes other options. Don’t get paralyzed by trying to keep all your options open! Freedom and fulfillment and peace of mind come through decision and commitment – not through trying to keep all options open.

Sometimes the options in front of us are big and sometimes they are small: e.g. when we choose between putting a little more kindness into the world or a little less kindness; more honesty or less honesty; more forgiveness or less forgiveness, and so on. Whether it’s a big choice or just a little one, you can sometimes know which is the right choice by putting yourself at the far end of your life and looking back – the choices that will give you *the most gladness then* are the choices are *right for you now*.

BECOMING THROUGH ACCEPTING REALITY

The wonderful thing about our journey with God is that it always starts from where we are - not from where we should have been or could have been! Our experience of weakness and failure and of making wrong choices does not have to weigh us down. If we know how greatly we are loved by God, and how much God wants to forgive us, it becomes easier to move on. And that is the kind of love God revealed to us through Jesus.

“Moving on” doesn’t mean disowning the negative moments in our personal history. Just the opposite: it involves accepting ourselves as the person we actually are, including our incompleteness! “I am the person who made those choices - some of them good and some bad”. I think we are more vulnerable to disappointment when we imagine we are supposed to “have it all together”. Even God hasn’t put that expectation on us: becoming is an unfinished process, and we are a work in progress.

Accepting reality also means not needing masks, pretences or excuses. Sometimes this takes time. Shame or guilt or anger or pride or sadness can get in the way. But these are only stages on the journey. The important thing is to keep moving towards self-acceptance. If we need to be forgiven, then that is our reality. And when God forgives, that is also part of our reality – so we don’t get stuck with a sense of guilt; we gratefully and joyfully move on.

In one of his parables Jesus contrasts a person who is in denial with one who is honest:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing aside, said this prayer to himself: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people – greedy, dishonest, adulterous, or even like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ The tax collector stood some distance away, not even raising his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner’. It was this man, I tell you, who went home at rights with God, not the other. (Luke 18:10-14)

Being forgiven is a liberating experience. But so is the ability to forgive! Psychologists point out that our mental health and physical health can be harmed if we are unforgiving and harbour resentment. It’s our self who is harmed by holding on to resentment. Forgiving those who have wronged us is healing for our self as well. To forgive can take moral courage in a society where many can only think of punishment.

My soul, give thanks to the Lord
all my being, bless God’s holy name.
My soul, give thanks to the Lord,
and never forget all his blessings.

It is God who forgives all your guilt,
who heals every one of your ills,
who redeems your life from the grave,
who crowns you with love and compassion.

The Lord is compassion and love,
slow to anger and rich in mercy.
He does not treat us according to our sins
or repay us according to our faults. (Psalm 102:1-4,8,10)

BECOMING THROUGH THE FORMATION OF CHARACTER

“Character” is mainly about moral strength, or strength of will. It is more than just personality and social skills.

Our becoming is a life-long partnership with God. God didn’t just bring the world into existence and then leave it to itself. Every moment of its existence depends on God just as much as its first moment! It’s like that with our life as well: God journeys with us. This is beautifully expressed in the psalms:

The Lord is my shepherd;
there is nothing I shall want.
Fresh and green are the pastures
where He gives me repose.

Near restful waters He leads me,
to restore my strength.
He guides me along the right path:
He is true to his name.

If I should walk in the valley of darkness,
no evil would I fear.
You are there with your crook and your staff;
with these you give me comfort...

Surely goodness and kindness will follow me
all the days of my life.
In the Lord’s own house shall I dwell
for ever and ever. (Psalm 23).

God is present to us in the world around us. When we feel attracted to things that are good or right or true or beautiful, we are catching glimpses of what we are made for. At the same time, we are intuiting the difference between being true to one’s self and being false to one’s self. This is where “conscience” comes into the picture.

Sometimes we choose against our better judgment, and then regret it. Choosing what conscience tells us is right is not always easy. It becomes easier with practice. In fact, “virtue” is difficult choices made easier through practice. Character is formed over the long-haul.

The opposite to character formation is self-indulgence. The slogan “everybody’s doing it” is an invitation to be like sheep. Those who aren’t practised in self-restraint end up having less control over their own actions. New Zealand has one of the highest rates of domestic violence. The quality of marriage and family life – and all that flows from it – depends on people being able to respect each other’s needs and not always insisting on getting their own way.

During our growing up years we can strengthen our self-restraint and self control by making small sacrifices – choosing to go without things that we could rightly choose to have or do. Better still, of course, when the personal sacrifices we make are of the kind that benefit others in some way.

There will be times of turmoil and confusion, especially in times of transition. Experiencing other people's love gives you the inner strength to see you through these times. Sometimes their love comes in reassuring words, but mainly it comes in the sacrifices they have made for you – including sacrifices you know nothing about. Parents' love is like that.

Seeking companionship and face to face time with people is really important for the formation of character. Social media and virtual reality (even granting their advantages) can isolate us from each other. Research confirms that they are creating a lot of loneliness. The most important time with others is, of course, time with family. It forms bonds of love that support you even when nothing else can.

O Lord, you search me and you know me,
you know my resting and my rising,
you discern my purpose from afar,
you mark when I walk or lie down,
my ways lie open to you.

Before ever a word is on my tongue
you know it, O Lord, through and through,
Behind and before you besiege me,
your hand ever laid upon me.

Too wonderful to me, this knowledge,
too high, beyond my reach...

... O where can I go from your spirit,
or where can I flee from your face?
If I climb the heavens, you are there.
If I lie in the grave, you are there.

If I take the wings of the dawn
and dwell at the sea's furthest end,
even there your hand would lead me,
your right hand would hold me fast.

If I say: "let the darkness hide me
and the light around me be night",
even darkness is not dark for you
and the night is as clear as the day. (Ps 139:7-12)

God holding our hand is a beautiful and powerful image.

"You can pull, and God will come your way.
But how exciting (and how much easier)
if you do it the other way round".
(J. Tulloch, *The Tablet*, 9/2/19)



BECOMING ONE'S TRUE SELF THROUGH MANAAKITANGA (CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER)

Many young people generously offer themselves for volunteer service and are actively involved in movements for social justice and care of the planet. This involves both personal sacrifice and personal satisfaction. There is a direct link between what we personally become and what we do to help others become.

Our own existence is a gift – wasn't owing to us. And so we are most truly ourselves *by being a gift*, i.e. by self-giving.

This echoes the Gospel teaching that the grains of wheat that fall into the ground and die to themselves become a harvest; the grain that doesn't 'die' to itself remains alone, (John 12:24). We experience this truth especially when we are helping troubled or needy people: that's when we can discover depths of healing, joy and meaning we didn't even know we were missing!

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I might have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
we're together on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

Practical concern for others is not enough if it aims only at individuals. It needs to spill over into social life and economic planning. Compassion, mercy and forbearance belong in public life, not just in private life.

This is hardly what happens when business practices pursue profits by making other people feel inferior and needy. Business and advertising work relentlessly, even unscrupulously, to heighten people's sense of need so that they will keep turning to the markets to offset their needs and wants and anxieties and fears. It is not in capitalism's interest for people to be content with sufficient. Making people feel they have to compete with neighbours can even lead them to measure their own worth by how well they can keep up, or be useful, or not have to depend on others. The market sells them that idea. But that's not how the Gospel values people.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear.
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

The economic system of our country and others is based on the premise that "the business of business is business"! On that basis, business and industry give first priority to maximizing profits. The needs of others are addressed *afterwards*, e.g. through the various ways tax revenue is distributed. Over many years, this system has resulted, and continues to result, in a still widening gap between rich and poor.

Greed and exploitation are at the root of the terrible suffering of many people, families and nations. A root problem requires root surgery: without a vision we are only tinkering. Something other than just tweaking the present system is needed. As Pope Benedict XVI has said:

Our world has grown weary of greed, exploitation and division, of the tedium of false idols and piecemeal responses, and the pain of false promises. Our hearts and minds are yearning for a vision of life where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in respectful communion. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. (To young people, Sydney, 2008).

A different economic system is needed. A country's economy needs to be strong, and there is a proper place for self-interest. But the underlying premise must be that the business of business is people. As the Maori proverb has it: he aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata! (What is the most important thing in the world? People, people, people.) On that premise the needs of weaker members of society would be factored into economic planning. That is different from giving market forces free reign and then trying to redress imbalances afterwards!

The needed alternative would have to be based on the meaning of human dignity. Present policies simply take it for granted that the fruits of industry and commerce belong to those who provide the finance, and not to those who provide the human labour. The problem with this is that workers and their jobs can be perceived mainly as cost items – and costs are to be minimized or eliminated for the sake of maximizing profits. This leaves workers, their families and livelihoods very vulnerable.

I will weep when you are weeping,
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.

An alternative system, based more on human dignity, holds that by providing their personal labour, workers contribute even more significantly to the enterprise than do those who provide finance, which is impersonal. And so the fruits of the enterprise/industry/business properly belong to the workers as well. And more equitable ways of sharing those fruits need to be worked out.

Similarly, trading relationships, industrial law and commercial practices would make room for what Pope Benedict called "gratuitousness". In other words, compassion, giving, and forgiving are factored into these relationships and practices. National policies and international law would include the needs of the world's poor, and migrants and refugees as a matter of right, not just of charity or goodwill.

There are many other examples of social inequity and social injustice. These examples might suffice to show how they derive from disregard for human dignity and the common good - and perhaps alert you to ways your own becoming and society's well being can be linked. After all, it is our Christian faith that gives us the greatest reasons of all for respecting human dignity.

Nakau te rourou nau te rourou ka ora ai te iwi – With your basket and my basket the people will live.

When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony. (*The Servant Song* - Richard Gillard.)

BECOMING THROUGH GROWING IN WISDOM

One of the big challenges of our time is to not let ourselves be drowned in bits and pieces of information. Information is very important. But on its own information is not wisdom. It isn't even knowledge until it is properly sifted and researched. Wisdom is the ability to discern and judge how knowledge applies in ways that are right and lasting and worthwhile.

"Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad." (Anon.)

The transformation of information into knowledge and wisdom is a process. It needs time, experience and reflection. It also needs silence and stillness – a break from busyness and noise. Sometimes it helps to turn off the flow of information coming into us, leaving time to think about what has already come.

Wisdom is a kind of meeting place. It is enshrined in people's experiences, histories and cultures, and so through respectful listening to one another we are able to journey together into better understandings, and explore together the bigger questions of life. It is where people's differences can belong, and through dialogue be enriching. It presupposes that "no one is an island".

In the scriptures, wisdom has a practical bent: it's about living a good life, personal virtue and social responsibility. It is a divine gift, and gives us insight into God's will. Jesus insisted on fulfilling the law - but according to the true meaning of law. He did not allow people to use the law against the purpose of the law. After some Pharisees had criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath day, he reminded them that "the sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath".

The purpose of "the law," including the commandments, is to protect underlying values. As we gradually identify with those values, we are already fulfilling the purpose of the law; the law becomes less of a constraint on us; we are already "at home" with what the law stands for. Fulfilling the underlying purpose of the law is life-giving.

Psalms 103, gives us a helpful starting place for becoming wise:

Before the mountains were born,
before the earth or the world came to be,
you were God from all eternity and forever...

To your eyes a thousand years
are like yesterday, come and gone,
no more than a watch in the night...

Make us know the shortness of our life
that we may gain wisdom of heart...

Our days are like grass:
like flowers of the field we blossom,
the wind blows over us and we are gone,
our place knows us no more.

But the Lord's kindness is forever...

BECOMING MORE THROUGH ‘SEEING’

There are going to be some very special moments in your life. They will be the kind of experiences that *point beyond themselves to something more*. For example, something wonderful in nature that leaves you feeling you are part of something much bigger than your own life-time. Or, the sudden feeling that even the good things of life (a good marriage, a successful business, good friends, good health, etc) still leave an empty gap somewhere inside you. Your own deep self tells you that there’s more than all this.

Or, someone you love has died, and suddenly everything around you appears in a different light: the things that seemed so important to you don’t seem quite so important now, and the things you knew about only vaguely, like heaven, suddenly seem so real.

Or, some sight or sound or scent will trigger some fond memory, and you know you are still linked to the people and the places of your past. There’s a feeling that they are still part of you, and that one day all good things will come together again.

“The profound is always
within our reach,
masquerading as the ordinary”
(Daniel O’Leary)

Or, you might be listening to the kind of music that makes you want to be still and quiet because it seems to be drawing you towards something. Or, in some quiet space on your own, you just experience the mystery of your own self, unique in all the universe. Why?

In all these experiences you are getting hints that there is more to your existence than you might have thought. The opposite to “seeing” in these ways is “not noticing” – because we don’t stop still long enough to notice the “something more” - as if sleep-walking! Some people have even narrowed their vision down to seeing only what is useful or profitable or pleasurable. Some see the world only as a kind of quarry to be exploited and used. They don’t notice that it is first and foremost a precious environment that can lift our spirits, and invites us to “see”, and makes us want to give thanks.

At the beginning of the second century CE, St Irenaeus said that we honour God by being alive – with the life that “comes from seeing God.” “Seeing” God means *knowing God’s presence* – in the experience of beauty, or love, or graced moments, or the sight of life-long faithfulness, or the sight of friends being reconciled, or in love’s heroic sacrifices, or in forgiveness and peace, or in the smiles on children’s faces, or in any of the ways that nature is revealed to us as a gift - God being the Giver.

“Look at the dance,
and you will see the Dancer” (A. de Mello)

This deep sense of God’s presence in all creation has very practical consequences, which the Maori world-view recognizes: the world’s resources are entrusted to us but belong to God; we have a duty of care for the earth (kaitiakitanga); the needs of the common good and our duty of care for one another (manaakitanga) take priority in all matters of property and ownership; etc. This world-view has been, and continues to be, trampled over by the excesses of Western individualism and capitalism. There are forms of poverty that result from this kind of oppression.

BECOMING THROUGH COMPANIONSHIP WITH JESUS OF NAZARETH

In his own time people loved being in Jesus' company, and sometimes spent days on end with him, even going hungry. How they felt about him gives us a window on the kind of Person he was – and a window on how we would have felt if we had been there! That's why we need to look at him in the four gospels. Down the centuries, and still today, people give their lives for him. All that Jesus went through for our sakes reveals how greatly we are loved by God.

On Good Friday, evil wasn't prevented from happening; instead it was turned against itself – used for its own defeat. That is how God works through the evils and sufferings we experience: "For those who love God, all things work together for their good" (St Paul to the Romans 8:28). When you think about it, One who can transform what happened on Good Friday into what happened on Easter Sunday is serious about ensuring life and love triumph over all our mess-ups, and all our sins, and death itself.

Imagine the joy He must have experienced on the morning of his resurrection. That's the joy He wants to share with us. Before his death, he promised he would bring his disciples a peace which nothing in the world could give, and nothing take away.



His risen life is not bound by the limitations of time and space, and so his presence to us is real, our relationship with him is real, and our conversations with him are real.

"The mystery is Christ among you, your hope of glory" (St Paul to the Colossians 1:27). "When the scriptures are proclaimed in the liturgy, Christ is speaking (*present tense!*) to his people" (Second Vatican Council; Liturgy 7). He is still doing the things he always did – now using a kind of sign language (the sacraments) - healing, forgiving, giving hope and new life. In the liturgy we allow ourselves to be absorbed by the mystery of Christ's presence and what He is doing for us. This is truly sacred time.

In fact, we move beyond time as it is measured by the movement of the planets; we move into another kind of time, namely the unfolding of that plan God had in mind from the beginning. (Ephesians 1:3-14). It reached its high point in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Through the seasons, cycles, feasts and rituals of the liturgy we connect with those events. Awareness of God's plan gives meaning to our lives.

For all of us, our becoming isn't complete until God has made "the whole of creation new" (Revelation 21:1-5). In the meantime, regardless of what can happen to any other aspect of our becoming, our relationship with the Risen Christ is always open, always nurturing, always there. Through union with him we are part of that new creation.

BECOMING THROUGH PARTICIPATING

On this journey of becoming we have not been left to ourselves. We belong to a community of saints and sinners who share the journey and support one another. Our relationship with Christ is personal, but not private. It is in and through and with the community of his disciples.

What Jesus did for us by his life and death was a gift; it wasn't owed to us. But gifts are not imposed; we have to *receive* them and *make them our own*. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to do this, in all the ways we live our faith.

This happens especially in the celebration of Eucharist: at the Last Supper Jesus told his disciples "do this in memory of me". This isn't just remembering in our minds. Jesus was echoing the ancient Hebrew practice of commemorating the Passover. That ritual gave the Jews of each succeeding generation a way of personally sharing in what happened at the Exodus. That was a once-for-all event, but the freedom it brought was meant for those who came after as well.

Eucharist is a memorial in that sense. It gives Christians of succeeding generations a way of stepping forward to personally and more deeply participate in Jesus' Passover from death to life, and to share in the freedom and joy this gave him. "... God brought us to life with Christ... and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven... (Ephesians 2:5, 6). That is now who we are - through real union with Christ.

Eucharist also makes us sharers in his mission: in receiving Holy Communion we receive Him whose body was 'given up' for others, and blood (life) was 'poured out' for others. Our Amen expresses our commitment to being 'for others' – being self-giving.



"Even when Eucharist is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, it is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation." (Pope John Paul II)

"In the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed, the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love". (Pope Francis)

Gather us in, the lost and forsaken,
gather us in, the blind and the lame;
call to us now, and we shall awaken,
we shall arise at the sound of our name.

We are the young, our lives are a mystery.
we are the old who yearn for your face.
We have been sung throughout all of history,
called to be light to the whole human race. (GIA Publications Inc. Marty Haugen.)

BECOMING THROUGH DYING

Perhaps someone very dear to you has already died, and you know the pain of losing them. Our Christian faith teaches that through our dying, “life is changed, not ended”.

Not only that: it teaches that “... all the good fruits of human nature, and all the good fruits of human enterprise, we shall find again, cleansed and transfigured...” (Second Vatican Council, GS 39). In other words, nothing that is precious to us – in our own life or in the lives of our friends – is ever lost. It will all belong in the “new creation”.

It is natural also to remember those who have died. This helps us to experience our on-going relationship with them. A sense of still belonging to each other is heightened when our remembering is ritualized, as it is in our nation’s ANZAC memorial services. A deep human instinct assures us of this belonging, and so does our faith. This is evidenced by the participation of so many young people who are choosing to participate in these services.



Just as our life is a gift from God in the first place, so too is eternal life. There are no words for describing the wonderful future God has in store for us. The scriptures use picture language, e.g. a great banquet. And because it is a gift - not owed to us - we wait for God to invite us in, at a time of God’s choosing; we don’t decide the time - we don’t gate-crash.

Nor do we let our life or our death just happen to us; we actively receive them. We receive gifts by saying “thank you.”

And remember: hope is not an assurance that things will always turn out the way we would like; rather, it is deep conviction that “all will be well” even when they don’t!

In the end, all our becoming is safely in God’s hands:

Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Trust in God still, and trust in me.
There are many rooms in my Father’s house;
If there were not, I should have told you.
I am going now to prepare a place for you,
and after I have gone and prepared you a place,
I shall return to take you with me;
so that where I am,
you may be too. (John 14:1-3)

AN INVITATION TO BECOME

Pope John Paul II had a great respect for young people, and knew the pains of becoming. In 2001 he said to young people in Kazakhstan:

Realize that each of you is of unique worth, and be ready to accept one another as you listen to each other's convictions and search together for the fullness of truth. Open yourselves to the One who created you out of love and wants to make you worthy, free and good people. Learn to listen in silence to the voice of God, who speaks in the depths of every heart; build your lives on sure and solid foundations; do not be afraid of commitment and sacrifice, which today require a great investment of energies but are the guarantee of success tomorrow. Discover the truth about yourselves, and new horizons will not cease to open up before you.

PRAYER

Dear God, make my life
a channel of your love
flowing into the world.

I want the world to be a better place
because I was here.

Help me to know what you had in mind
when you chose me.

Thank you for being part of my life
and for the gifts you have given me.

Keep me part of the community
which lives Jesus' life in our world. Amen

My own prayer for each of you at the end of this letter is the prayer St Paul wrote into his letter to the Christians at Ephesus:

"This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name. Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit, for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will – with all the saints – have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all understanding, you are filled with the utter fullness of God.

Glory be to him, whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21)

Whakapaingia ki a koutou katoa,

Bishop Peter

