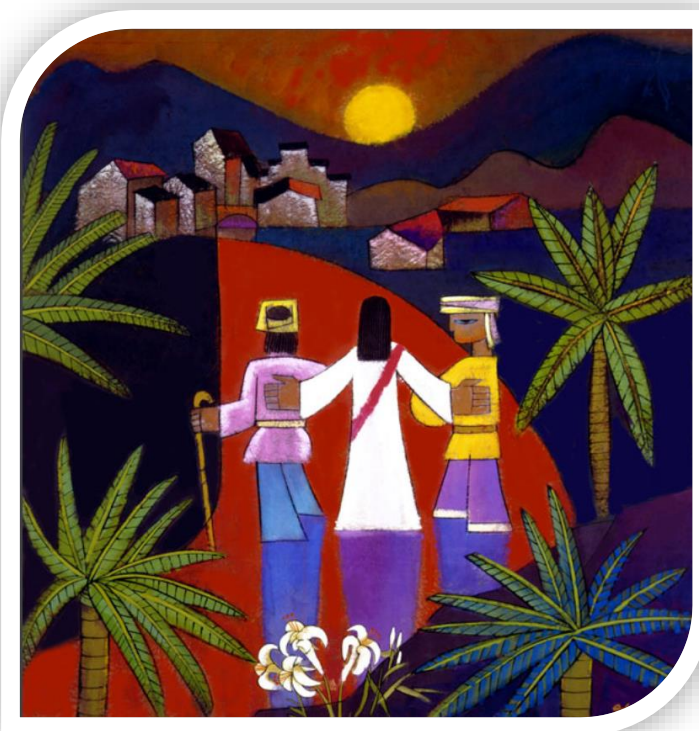


# Encountering the Divine



The Road to Emmaus — [www.heqiaart.com](http://www.heqiaart.com) — (Painting on Colin's Wall)

Colin MacLeod (editor)

National Centre for Religious Studies

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## Foreword

Colin MacLeod (TCI/NCRS)

Recently I was reading a blog by an enthusiastic atheist, working hard in the ether to convert me to her religious belief system, when I was struck by a common theme within this particular genre: “If God is real then why don’t we see him?”

I started thinking anew about all the ‘encounters with God’ that take place in scripture - in gardens, desert, land, sea, mind and heart. I started thinking anew about the encounters others have had in our Church tradition – mystics, visionaries and everyday women and men. And then the profound encounters I’ve had myself started coming to mind. So I thought, “How good would it be to gather stories of people’s individual experiences of God? How good would it be for us to have some gospel of today to share with those who are looking for God and with those who have found God?”

So, I began by asking those I worked with to share some of the taonga of their own experiences of encountering God. I didn’t know who would reply, what the stories would be or what we would do with them. But, I don’t think God’s ever interested in that level of detail.

So... this is the result thus far. It’s not a new idea and it’s not a closed book. I’m very grateful for the courage and generosity of those who have shared their stories and given permission for you to use them in your own contexts. They are not intended to be literary works of art with crisp editing and perfect grammar.

What follows are simply human stories from Aotearoa of **Encounters with the Divine**.



te pūtahi a motu mō ngā akoranga whakapono  
national centre for religious studies

## *A hand squeeze from God.*

**Lyn Smith** (TCI/NCRS – Auckland - 2017)

Audrey Teresa Smith was born in Sheffield, England on 5th September 1934 and died 31st May 2015 at the age of 80, not that old really these days. A convert to Catholicism and a passionate woman of faith. She was the wife of Frank and the mother of 4 children Teresa, Julie, Lyn and Anthony. A widow for 30 years. She was a keen gardener, loved her family, a great baker and home maker. I called her Mum.

When my siblings and I began to realise that things were not quite the same with Mum, she was already in the initial stages of Vascular Dementia, not that we knew the technical term at first. Mum was about 72-73 years old when the symptoms first appeared forgetfulness, some shouting and strange behaviour like putting all the dressing table contents into one drawer.

I remember on one of my visits home sitting with Mum having lunch and she said, “I am not mad you know, I just forget things”. When that same visit, my sisters and I were late home from a trip to Whitby, Mum spoke to us as if we were all teenagers, with that annoyance because we were late but also the slight fear of worry that Mum’s have when they don’t know where their children are. Probably as Mary did when she found Jesus in the Temple.

As a family, we had seen this before in Grandma and Uncle Derek, so we knew that this was the beginning and the journey was not always going to be easy. It was a little easier in some ways for me as I live across the other side of the world. I did however, as Mum’s illness progressed see marked changes when I visited every couple of years and more so when we spoke on the phone. Mum and I had talked almost every week to fortnight about life and what was going on in the family since I moved to New Zealand in December 1994. The phone calls became less frequent as Mum couldn’t talk so much or really answer my questions. We went to Skype and had some fun showing things to each other, with fewer and fewer words being spoken. My sister Julie, who lived at home would usually be there as well and so we had a three-way conversation, with just two people talking.

As Mum’s illness progressed, my sister said that the one constant with Mum was that even though she didn’t remember much, every Saturday night Mum would get ready and sit and wait to be taken to Church for Mass. Her faith was always important for Mum and I wonder if there was a feeling of security and love she encountered there in the community she had belonged to for over 20 years.

When Mum could no longer leave the house or communicate at all, Fr Gerard would come and give her communion and a blessing. When we were close to the end and we skyped, Julie would sometimes leave me to just talk to Mum as she lay in her bed. Being a talker, I could easily fill the time, but on occasion we just sat in silence, me here in New Zealand and Mum in England. Her face was always quite calm and I wondered what she thought of. I said my goodbyes a few times during those Skypes.

I then received the dreaded phone call from Anthony, “You need to come home now”. I booked a ticket and within 72 hours was there with Mum. 72 hours of praying hoping to get there before she died. (My Dad had died very suddenly and I had not been there.)

I felt a calmness  
come over me

As I entered the room, I walked over to Mum’s bed, took her hand and said, “Mum, it’s Lyn”. Much to everyone’s surprise as she had been uncommunicative for about 3 months, she squeezed my hand and I felt a calmness come over me. Almost as if to say, ‘I know’. Mum took her last breath about 6 hours later, a shallow breath. I led prayer for her knowing that Mum was now with God, that moment made us all realise that death is not to fear, but accepted as returning home to God.

## *A Lesson in Listening*

**Gerald Scanlan** (TCI National – Dunedin - 2017)

My wife Geraldine and I were enjoying (more or less) a brief summer holiday with our older son, Ben. Based in Waimarama, in the golden Hawkes Bay, we had everything going for us: beach, sunshine and the East Coast summer heat that can make time stretch out, slowing life down to its essential rhythm.

Ben was in a non-communicative phase, a bit withdrawn and moody. Normally his brother and sister snap him out of his introspection, but they hadn't joined us on this quick trip to visit Geraldine's parents and revisit a favourite summer haunt.

We tended to do our own thing during the day and join Gerda and Wieke for evening drinks and dinner. Ben had just turned 21 and was about to head to Auckland to study, so he had a lot on his mind.

I became present to  
the grace of that  
long moment

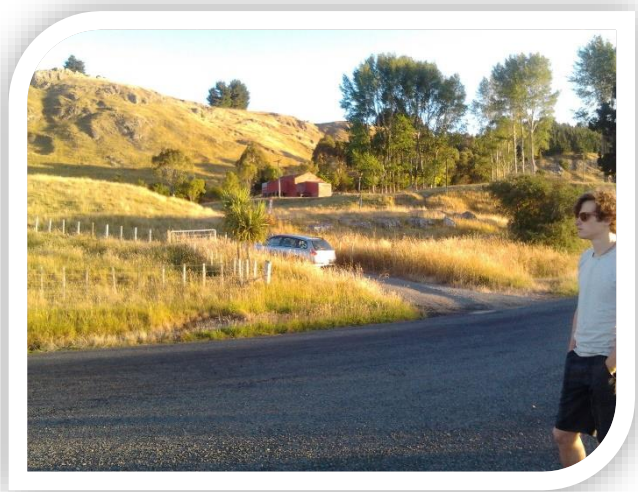
On our last night, we drove back from Havelock North to Waimarama and detoured down a back road. In the last of the sunlight, we climbed up through a valley to a high point. We pulled over to take in the view. It was a gorgeous evening – cloudless blue sky, soft light on paddocks and hills with that distinctive tawny-green Hawkes Bay hue, utterly still, and no-one else in sight. Cell phone in hand, I jumped out and snapped a few photos, commenting to no-one in particular how stunning it was. Ben cast me a withering look and instructed me to stop talking, stop moving and just listen. So I did.

I stood quite still and let the silence envelop me. Slowly, I became present to the grace of that long moment. I heard the faint whisper of air in the trees – more breath than breeze. I heard insects doing insect things, birds calling in brief bursts, a sheep or two, the faint hum of machinery. I heard the heat rising from the earth and the dust settling on the ground.

Then I started to hear my own heart sing with the joy of silence, grateful for the gift given to me by my deep and soulful son. And I remembered that God wasn't in the tempest or earthquake or fire, but in the gentle whisper. And I realised, perhaps for the first time, that to know that God I needed to listen, with all the attention and patience I could muster.

There's a photo that goes with this story, to remind me of my "road to Maraetotara encounter", and of the gift Ben gave me that evening. The photo of course is silent – perhaps the only photo I have which is not about the view but about the sound, a sound so subtle that it could only be divine.

*At the time of writing Gerald Scanlan is Director of TCI, and divides his time between Dunedin and Wellington. Ben is now 25 and living in Auckland. He's in the photo.*



# *A Story of Forgiveness*

**Anne Kennedy** (TCI/NCRS – Dunedin – 2017)

“Go in peace. You are forgiven” – Jesus.

My mother was a small woman and her life was not an easy one. Her father was killed in a work place accident when she was three weeks old. At the time of the accident, Mary, as she was named was the new born sibling of three older pre-school children. The faded sepia photograph on the wall was all they had of their father.

Following his death, life was poor and simple for the Irish/Italian settler family in the early 1900s. With no government assistance my grandmother raised her children with the support of her mother and other relatives and friends who helped when they could. Her mother washed and ironed shirts for the local professional men to provide for her children. Mary’s family was steeped in traditional Irish Italian faith and much of their young life was centred around parish activities in the small church her Italian grandfather helped to build.

Later when the family moved to the city Mary became an apprentice upholsterer and through a connection she made at Holy Cross Seminary where she was ‘man powered’ during the war, she met Patrick, a farmer from Southland whom she married. Mary and Paddy, as she called him, raised their four children to young adult hood in a happy home filled with the same strong faith they had inherited.

On a frosty Dunedin morning in July everything changed. My father went to work as usual and was dropped off by my younger brother across the road from his workplace. He stepped onto the pedestrian crossing, walked a few steps and was hit by a car. He sustained a serious head injury and was admitted to intensive care. Worse was to come – the driver was a friend of my brothers and his parents were friends of my parents. During the three days my father lay in intensive care we struggled to believe what had happened. Strangely my grandfather also lived for three days after his accident before he died in the same hospital – history has painful ways of repeating itself.

The days following dad’s death were filled with a pain and sadness we had never known. The house was full of people as we prepared for his funeral. In the midst of our grief we were told of the driver’s pending court case. My mother asked if this could be resolved without a charge and was told this was not possible.

Many long nights followed as dad’s absence in our home began to make his death real for all of us. In our conversations mum maintained dad’s death was an accident caused by a young man’s mistake – reminding us “there but for the grace of God ...” It was a struggle for us as teenagers to accept this as our anger at the loss of our father set in. Mum reminded us constantly that we all make mistakes and need forgiveness. She must have thought often of her own mother’s grief as she comforted us and grieved silently.

The weeks that followed were hard. The house emptied and life slowly got back to a new normal without our father. One day I came home from school early. Mum was pleased to see me and said the young man and his family were coming to see her. They arrived and I opened the door and standing there were three people whose faces mirrored the pain, shame, guilt, grief and sadness they were feeling. Mum greeted them graciously – both mothers reached out and held each other as they wept quietly. We sat down and there was silence. The young man looked as if he would cry. His father prompted him to look at mum and me and say what he needed to.

Between his sobs he told us how sorry he was, how much he regretted what had happened and asked what he could do to help. Mum stood up and walked towards him. She put her arms around him and held him gently as if he were her own son. Quietly she said “.... I forgive you and I want you to forgive yourself. I know you didn’t mean to hurt my husband – you made a mistake. I can see the pain his death has caused. But I want you to know that I truly forgive you.” The effect of these words was a moment of pure grace that held us in a bubble of mercy and forgiveness. It felt like we were in the midst of a living gospel as the words of Jesus echoed by my mother filled the room and made him present right there with us soothing our broken hearts and bring us his healing and peace.

During the days of the court case that followed the profound experience we had that day came back to us. Jesus was a silent comforting witness as we listened to the evidence, reliving the shock of the accident and death of our father while witnessing again the shame of the young man and his family as the verdict was read.

I forgive you, and I want you  
to forgive yourself.

As we both grew older, and my mother became elderly and frail, we would still recall that day and the blessing it was for all of us. We looked back on it as an unforgettable encounter with Jesus. I would remind her that it was through her strong faith in Jesus that we discovered the true sweetness of his forgiveness on that sad day there in our lounge many years ago.

## *Suva Cathedral*

**Gary Finlay** (TCI – Wellington - 2017)

I was 32 when I received my First Communion. It was in a prefab on the campus of the University of the South Pacific in Suva. The Laucala Bay parish was in the process of building a new church so I fronted up in the classroom along with the parish children. A few days earlier I had been received into the Church by the parish priest, Fr. Peter Carde, SM.

Sometime later I attended an early morning week-day Mass at Suva Cathedral. The people gathered that morning were multi-cultural mix. The Dutch priest was assisted by Indian altar-servers and the congregation reflected the varied make-up of the Church in Fiji. As I knelt at the altar rails I was flanked by a Tongan religious sister and a Samoan brother.

On receiving communion I was suddenly filled with an overwhelming awareness of belonging to something immeasurably bigger than myself. The sensation is hard to put into words but it was palpable and lasted a few minutes.

It was, I suppose, what is sometimes referred to as a peak or mountain-top experience. I have never since experienced anything quite like it. Like most people, I presume, I live my life generally and spiritually on a plateau – with occasional ups and downs. But the sensation of being part of the Body of Christ - a community far beyond my immediate surroundings – has, thankfully, never completely left me.

Writers like Thomas Merton assure us that you don’t have to be a St Teresa of Avila or St. John of God to have a ‘mystical’ experience. So I guess my encounter in Suva makes me just one of many ordinary mystics.

An overwhelming awareness  
of belonging...



# *Dado's Cuppa*

**Maya Bernardo** (TCI – Wellington – 2017)

“...this study strongly suggests that reforms on education...blah blah yada yada” —*eeeeennnngk!*  
*ennnnngk!*!-- That’s the sound of our buzzer piercing through my intellectual reverie as I beaver through my dissertation, an investigation that I am sure will change the world—restore justice, make peace possible and rescue humanity from itself. Or so I think.

The person buzzing is Dado, a homeless man in his 50s who lost his mind from booze or drugs or most probably from both and from what I heard, a broken heart. He roams the streets around the vicinity where I live, with his tattered clothes, long gooey hair, finger nails tucked with dirt enough to plant a potato and most of all, his endless hollering about the end of the world and an argument he carries out with an invisible adversary. Our house was in the heart of central Manila. And that means 24 hours traffic, noise, pollution, and place where poverty and prosperity intertwine like two different threads of the same carpet.

Over the past two months or so, Dado has fancied to buzz our house and demand (take note, not ask, but demand) a cup of coffee. And get this—nearly every day save on weekends, where he perhaps does his extortions in Church. My mother for reasons I have never cared to ask because I was absorbed in saving the world, would graciously give him a hot cup of coffee with some buns to go with it.

In this particular day, carrying out his usual extortion from our house, he crossed the line, mine at least. After what I can only make out of the sound from my study room, he shouted at my mother because the coffee was not hot enough, so he threw the cup into the streets to express his disappointment. That’s it! I rose from seat, parked my important work and stormed out of my room to put this menacing beggar in his place!

It is Christ asking for  
a cup of coffee

But before I could begin raging war with Dado, I heard my mother apologizing—“sorry about that, let me fix you another cup”. That was the final straw to the final straw. By this point I aimed my ballistic-missile towards my mom—enabler! “How can you let him do that to you?” I fumed. My mother, who is anything but a dancing daisy, kept her calm but gave me this incredulous look that seem to say—and whose child are you?! In a very contained tone which is meant to keep us both from imploding in front of Dado, who would have probably enjoyed and joined the spectacle, she said—“Don’t you see? It is Christ asking for a cup of coffee”, with that she turned her back from me and handed the steaming cuppa to Dado.

The calm but firm authority with which she corrected me felt like a bucket of ice cold water poured over my impassioned self-righteousness. To witness her hand the coffee to Dado with reverence, pulled out the log in my eye, illuminating me to the vision she saw so clearly.

I returned silently to my room. I was not able to resume my writing. I looked at my “important” work and saw how it had blind-sided me to God’s presence right in front of me. Dado was the voice calling me home from my many pursuits, reminding me to whom, for whom, and with whom I do the work I do.

“*Eeeeeennnngk—eenngk!*”. I immediately stopped typing and rose from my seat “Ma, I’ll get it... coming!”. “I want my coffee!” Dado bawled. He certainly doesn’t sound like Jesus to me (not that I would really know) but I’m sure this is Him, Christ, no less. I handed Dado his piping hot coffee with bun and thanked him for the visit.



## *I will be with You*

*Fr Gerard Aynsley (TCl & Parish priest – Dunedin – 2017)*

I remember well my first experience of a Home Mass. I would have been 9 or 10. It was a dark night and the home was located somewhere in the rural outskirts of Gore and Mass was celebrated in an ordinary lounge in the home of a family I had never met. How strange, and so different to the foreboding red brick Church in Gore! When at Mass there, I would spend my time counting the rows of bricks or trying to figure out the various moments of the Mass according to how much longer we had to be there – once we got to the 'Our Father' I felt we were on the home straight. Nearly finished, I would think!

Here, in this family's home, I was sitting on the floor, the fire was on and the altar – the kitchen table - was right in our midst. I recall that it was the first time that I received Communion from the Chalice and that seemed to make it extra special. Even at that age, being a staunch Southland farm boy, I was not inclined to speak out my feelings, but on this occasion in the car on the journey home I chattered away about what an amazing Mass that was. That is the part that strikes me most – the uninhibited exuberance I shared shamelessly on the way home. I look back often at that childhood memory and think of it as the first time that I had a real sense of God. Even though I thought for many years that an encounter with God had eluded me – this worried me somewhat when I was in the seminary – I learnt to look back on that Home Mass in rural Gore with great affection.

The first time that I  
had a real sense of  
God

The other moment that comes to mind is one that caught me by surprise and sounds so uninteresting I wonder how it is that I still think back on it as one of the more special moments of my priestly life. I was Chaplain at Kavanagh College in Dunedin for about 12 years where I would do little more than wander around at break time. I did enjoy being among the young people at Kavanagh and loved their humour and exuberance and freedom. When I shifted to Australia for study I missed them so much. However, from time to time, particularly on my dark days, I would get frustrated with their apparent disinterest in anything the Church had to offer and I would worry about the choices they made. It is in response to these sorts of worries that I believe I was gifted with a special experience of God's joy.

It was the beginning of a new term and I was wandering around the top part of the school when, unbidden, an experience of overwhelming joy came upon me. There wasn't anything happening, I wasn't even speaking with anyone, the sun wasn't shining in a particularly magnificent way, there was just this striking interior feeling. And with it I experienced what I am convinced was a glimpse of Jesus enjoying the young students whom he loved so much. He gifted me that day with a little taste of the divine pleasure. It's a moment that has since shaped my pastoral outlook. On future occasions when I was downhearted or disappointed or disillusioned or frustrated, annoyed at the way some people were, I would be reminded that maybe God was looking at things in a different way than I was. God was more than likely delighting in this person and celebrating the sheer fact that they were alive.

In John's gospel, we hear Jesus promise to be with his disciples, but he also promises to be in his disciples. There are numerous, unspecified times that I have appreciated that God has been with me and alongside me. It is something I only come to appreciate in hindsight. However, these two experiences I see as moments when I noticed that Jesus was living and loving in me and they hold a special place in my memory.

# *Jesus Gave me a Crunchie Today*

**Colin MacLeod** (TCI/NCRS – Dunedin – 2017)

School holidays and my wife, Jan, and I find ourselves in Pak'n'save in the middle of a weekday instead of our usual weekend re-stock. As usual, lots of people wheeling trolleys, carrying baskets, kids in tow pecking at Mum for this or that on the shelf. The beginnings of Christmas glitz'n'glamour appearing in the aisles – whole hams, boxes of chocolates and normal treats now in red and green wrap and claiming to be cheaper.



Yet, something is not quite as usual. More trolleys with less in them? More people? Different people? Less shoes, more tattoos? More junkfood, less vegies? Less men, more diverse hair colour and piercings? Older clothes and younger mums with kids? An air of calculator thinking going into the choice of each item placed in the trolleys? Benefit day.

I feel embarrassed about our trolley. Sure, we only shop once a fortnight, and by our own arbitrary standards of wealth we're certainly not rich – single income but a good job etc. We're not selfish people, our family is very committed to social justice, we care for the poor in lots of ways. Yet there's too much stuff in our trolley. Big block of cheese, bacon, sandwich ham, Doritos, nice coffee, dishwasher tablets, etc. You get the picture.

A full trolley on benefit day is food for thought. I notice all sorts of faces around me and imagine lives lived behind those expressions. Grumpy parents, adults with special needs and helpers, elderly people with their own bags on wheels, a trio of young men with scowls on their faces and beer under their arms. People who smile when our eyes meet as trolleys pass in an aisle, and people to whom I am invisible, or perhaps, I imagine, are just used to being invisible themselves.

On arriving at the checkout we're keen to be getting home and stashing our embarrassing load of plenty. But there's quite a queue and we've got to wait a bit for the four people in front to get their food through. \$36, \$102, \$47 and a Winz card declined until some items are left at the till. Behind us there's only one bloke with a wee basket of items. So I tell him to go in front, "We'll be ages."

"No, I'm not in any hurry," he says.

"Neither are we. Seriously, you go ahead."

"Oh, if you're sure, thanks."

I move back, he moves in. Middle aged, maybe 60s, nice smile, old clothes, holes in the elbows & hem, not clean on today. My imagination ticks away and creates his day and what he might be thinking... "What a nice young man letting me go first ..." He reaches for a candy bar, on special (85c), almost as an after-thought.

Eucharist at the checkout

"Good on you", I muse. "Must be bloody tough... how often do you buy a chocolate bar... I don't know how lucky I am... nice of me to let you in... wonder if your flat has a shower?..."

And he's gone. Almost. I start unpacking the trolley onto the conveyer belt and startle as he taps my arm. "Here, thanks for letting me in front of you." And he puts the Crunchie bar in my hand. "No, no, no. It was no problem, you keep it." The world changes forever as my musing train of thought derails. New thoughts, unspoken, arrive, "Accept the Crunchie, you arrogant bugger. You know nothing about this guy and you're not the only one with something to give."

Groceries in the boot. I take the chocolate bar from my pocket, break it, and give half to Jan. "Jesus gave me a Crunchie today," I say. "Eucharist at the checkout, who would have thought?"

## *My Kid*

**Nick Wilson** (TCL – Palmerston North – 2017)

As a younger man, I used to wonder about the parenting skills of some of the parents who would bring their kids to church! Can't you occupy that kid with a book or toy? Why are you letting them roll around the floor? Go get them off the altar! They're screaming – how you take them outside and soothe them so we can get on with our prayer in here!

And then along came Lorraine. We married and soon after there was Flynn. This baby was easy! Nice and quiet in church! But little did I know that this little ginger-headed chap was as precocious and inquisitive as you would find, particularly in a church setting!

One day at St. Michael's Church in Taita, Fr. Pat McCullough was gently explaining to us the wisdom of the readings of the day, and how to apply it to our lives – the congregation was captivated! The next thing I know, there is this kid racing up the middle aisle shouting "Amen! Amen! Amen!" With his hands raised up, in the manner of a fervent energetic Pentecostal pastor! I smirked and thought how funny it was and then immediately realised that this charismatic little chap was mine! While we were listening intently, Flynn had slipped off, and apparently, enthusiastic about the homily and wanted to encourage Fr. Pat along and energise the congregation!

I bolted from my pew like I had seen countless parents do before and scooped up my little guy, impressing on him the importance of being quiet. The little non-compliant grin from him in that moment was the Holy Spirit telling me something about kids in church! From that moment, any judgmental attitude I had about noisy kids in church evaporated!

The Holy Spirit  
telling me something

I thought about how parents of young kids manage their little ones out of the house in a timely fashion to be there for church and have them there for a sustained time. What a miracle! Little books, noiseless toys and snacks in packaging that doesn't make a noise are some of the strategies I have seen and used to make sure I can be present for the whole of Mass. I know parents of young kids stay away from church because they feel they can't cope, don't like attention being drawn to them and that simply, it is just too hard!

Now, I let my kids wander and sit with their friends or other parishioners that they have got to know because they are regular attenders. They are known and know the people of our faith community. They know they belong and that the church is their home.

Instead of judging, I offer help to a parent who by some miracle has made it with little kids and is in full swing children management mode in amongst the sacredness and reverence of the Eucharist. I encourage the parents who do come and make it known that we are so glad they are here!

Jesus reminds us in Matt 19:14 - "Let the little children come to me and do not try to stop them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." So let's encourage our young families and when they do arrive, remind them that we are just so glad that they are there!

## *Penelope Rose*

**Catherine Fyfe** (TCI Board – Wellington – 2017)

On the 1st of July this year our little angel Penelope Rose was born. She had returned to God five days earlier.

Penelope was the much anticipated and already adored first child, first grandchild, first great-grandchild and, for me, first great niece. We'd been joking that I didn't think I looked like my image of a "Great Aunt". I decided that, instead, I'd be her "great Aunt": a fabulous aunt. One to teach her wonderful things and have fun with. Heirloom items had been inspected, a new family christening gown started to replace a tiny 140 year old one, practical outfits, bibs and wraps made and purchased and, just days before, her crib and other necessities had been delivered to the high-country farm that was her home. Her parents were all ready to finish creating her room.

Our wee one had been a very active baby: twisting, turning and summersaulting regularly. Then our wee angel suddenly stopped moving. Her parents faced the trauma of scans that showed she had died. They were advised that the best course of action was for labor to be induced and for her to be delivered naturally. For five days we waited as her parents were expertly taken care of in the hospital.

On the Saturday I flew down to join them, as parents were still returning from overseas. Penelope's young Aunt came with me to spend time at the hospital with them as we waited. We debated what to say? How to say it? How do you refer to the baby whose sex and name were unknown at that stage? How on earth do you communicate effectively and appropriately in such a terrible situation? How do cope with parents so deeply broken-hearted. What were you thinking God? You really need to help me here? What to tell everyone that was waiting for news, both here and overseas? I decided that the only thing to do was to be as I normally am and to be guided by the instinct of what would feel right and hope that God's hand would be on my shoulder. I was reminded of the words "be not afraid, I go before you". So it was that we cried, we hugged, we laughed and we talked about many diverse things. Then our wee angel decided it was time to leave the safety of her Mother and arrive.

God's signal maybe...  
"Be not Afraid"

An hour after she was born, her Dad sent us a text to tell us that Penelope Rose had arrived. She was quite large at 3lb 8oz, even though only 7 months gestation. We were asked if we would like to go and meet her. So at 9.30pm we headed off to the hospital, armed with food for the parents, as requested. When we arrived, her parents first instinct was to warn us that she had been dead for 5 days and were we sure we wanted to see her? They were worried about our reaction. But she was our gorgeous, tiny little angel. My first words were "hello my little one, I'm your Auntie Catherine and I love you very much". Her proud parents showed us her long legs and quite big feet. They weren't from our side of the gene pool! Clearly she was going to have her mother's height. We admired her long, elegant fingers and little curls of black hair around her ears. We tucked "Rosebud", the tiny knitted rabbit with a pattern of rosebuds woven into it I'd made if our baby was a girl, into her crib with her.

The next day her Great –Grandparents, Aunt and Uncles came to meet her with close friends. Again we celebrated, mourned and laughed until the moment came for her to be taken in the care of the Undertaker for the plane journey to Wellington for the autopsy. How to let her go? How would her parents leave the hospital and go home without her?

Penelope Rose came home two days later. Her parents were able to show her the farm on which she would have lived such a special life, meet the dogs that would have been her constant companions and have her first stories read to her. Her Grandparents arrived home from overseas to meet her. Then, on a stunning winters day, with not a cloud in the sky, we watched her parents bring down the tiny white coffin onto the lawn for the christening and funeral. Her Dad's big hands carrying Penelope.

We took her to the crematorium for the final farewell and afterwards we stood outside and released balloons into the sky – somehow we managed it in unison on instruction from Father Chris and I looked up a few seconds later to see a distinct “P” shape forming. I blinked and thought I was imagining it but, no, there it was and there it stayed for many seconds. God's signal, maybe, to say that he had her. Be not afraid.

What we've learnt from that day is that, no matter that trauma of this experience, it was a thousand-fold better that the experience of so very many who have travelled this path before. We've learnt that babies were often delivered by C Section, usually taken away before the parents even had a chance to meet them and that certainly they didn't have the chance to read them their first story and show them their home. People mourned with us and, for many, they mourned for themselves, for babies lost up to 65 years before.

Penelope Rose, we love you and miss you terribly. We miss the change to laugh with you and teach you, to delight in you as you grow. But we know God has you in his tender care. We have your wonderful parents in our care.



## *Rubber Bats can be Deceptive*

*Lyn Smith (TCI/NCRS – Auckland - 2017)*

I live in Glen Eden West Auckland, a suburb of Auckland that has a great vibe too it and a feeling of community. I have within walking distance of my home, eight different groups who all call themselves Christian. My own Catholic Church, a Mormon Church, an Anglican, a Baptist, a Congregational, Jehovah Witness, the Father's House of Prayer and the Embassy of Christ. What an unusual group we must seem to those who are not of our faith tradition.

I pass the Mormon Church to go to my Catholic Church each Saturday evening and there are always people gathering. The Jehovah witness comes around the street where I live to knock on the door and witness to their faith tradition. In the past couple of years I have felt a concerted effort by them to save me from myself. I think they must have me down for special treatment. They normally knock, I smile and they talk for a while and then go when I say I am a practicing Catholic.

Until one Saturday about eight months ago a knock came at the door and as usual I went to answer it. I stood there in my shorts and Monsters of Rock T-shirt from 1981 (an outdoor concert in England), which has a fiery demon on the front, clutching a pitchfork. The woman very kindly asked me if I knew Jesus. I was pleased to be able to tell her that I did. Did I want to know Jesus better she asked. I said I think I was quite well versed in Jesus and was happy to leave it at that.

Sometimes we just  
need to be awake  
enough to meet God

No, she insisted I should know more, while looking distinctly at my T-shirt and I am sure thinking, what on earth could I know about Jesus. I offered to take a leaflet thinking she would go away. My mistake! She wanted to come back and discuss the leaflet at a later date. I remember saying I would read it and email the address if I had any questions. That seemed to satisfy her and off she went. I thought I had made my escape quite well. I said to my husband I should have invited her for a cup of tea, to which he just said, "Nooooo".

Wrong again! Just after Halloween last year, when I had had a costume party for friends and given out sweets to the neighbourhood children. I was on the deck cleaning out the cages of Ozzy and Eddie, the rabbits, when I realised there were two people stood on the deck behind me. I was once again in shorts and another heavy rock demon t-shirt of some description. They were, a man and woman, very well dressed, with not a demon in sight. Another man stood by the stairs of the deck.

The man asked again about my knowledge of Jesus, I thought they are back, with reinforcements this time. I again politely explained me and Jesus were okay and I was happy with the relationship I had with him. While this encounter was going on I realised that the woman was stood slightly behind the man staring intently at the witches on the fence, the various skulls on the table and the dozen or so rubber bats that were hanging from the deck, at my t-shirt and then back to the bats. She was obviously not over happy with the scene before her.

I was asked again about Jesus and how he could save me from my life of 'darkness'. I smiled and said I wasn't so sure it was necessary, as I worked for the Catholic Church teaching religious education. They looked at each other, looked me up and down and the woman said, "really!" I offered to show them my credentials, but neither wish to see them. I don't think they were convinced as the woman said something like "likely story."

As they left I imagined the conversation as the gate was hurriedly opened and closed behind them. The Catholic Church sure has weird people working for them, as I thought the same about them. Encountering God comes in all shapes and forms, sometimes we just need to be awake enough to meet God, perhaps next time I'll offer a cup of tea.



# *The Singer in the Passenger Seat*

**Catherine Gibbs** (TCI – Wellington - 2017)

Songwriters use poetry combined with sounds to intercept what is inside your head. Songs can open up new circles of meaning when interpreted through the eyes of faith. Four stories of closure coincided one evening while driving home after Mass. It was dusk and raining steadily, and I was wrapped up with the sad feeling of endings.

I had just returned home from a European trip laden with special memories. In processing these, my mind was deeply saddened by the spectre of thousands of rows of the war dead, of the refugee tent settlements crouching under Parisien motorways, and of the piles of floral tributes to the victims of the latest terrorist attacks in Westminster. Secondly, I was missing my good friends who had just shifted far away. It was going to be that much more difficult to see them again. Also, I was deeply disturbed by the news of the collapsed Antarctic ice shelf and the serious consequences for our future. The soft autumn rains swished away by the slap of window wipers, reminded me that this was the season of death and decay. Familiar green/blue landscapes would be washed in sepia tones for the next four months.

All so depressing. For a mood change I flicked on the radio.

*'There is freedom within, there is freedom without  
Try to catch the deluge in a paper cup  
There's a battle ahead, many battles are lost  
But you'll never see the end of the road  
While you're traveling with me.*

*Hey now, hey now  
Don't dream it's over...'*

In that instant He was singing to me from the passenger seat.

*'Hey now, hey now  
When the world comes in  
They come, they come  
To build a wall between us  
We know they won't win'.*

The gospel of the day (Luke 24: 13-35) had just been proclaimed at evening Mass. It was the Emmaus story of two people walking away from Jerusalem, saddened by what had happened to Jesus. 'Stay with us for darkness is falling.'

He was singing along  
in the passenger seat

Here I was, inside the Emmaus story and this time He was singing along in the passenger seat.

*'My possessions are causing me suspicion but there's no proof  
In the paper today tales of war and of waste...'*

Peeling back the meaning of the lyrics, our hidden God is revealed. Jesus patiently luring me back, away from despair to hope.

*'Only shadows ahead barely clearing the roof  
Get to know the feeling of liberation and release*



*Hey now, hey now  
Don't dream it's over...*

What struck me was how the words of a well known pop song could have deep significance for our faith. How endings are simultaneously and inevitably new beginnings. This ordinary love song produced a completely unexpected outcome.

How to respond to this moment of grace? My mind re-examined those sad stories that had darkened my mood.

Those trip memoirs provided unforgettable experiences of the global challenges we face with refugees, terrorism and the consequences of war. I became mindful of the power of prayer for peace. The disappointment I felt with friends shifting away, became an opportunity to appreciate more deeply what was important about that friendship. Their absence became a blessing. Massive chunks of melting ice is an extraordinary sign from nature, urging each of us to take collective action to care more deeply for creation. Then as the weather turns us to face up to winter, the Spirit provides a positive opportunity to reflect on the circle of regeneration, of savouring the past and anticipating a future with hope.

This song shares a special grace that can be found in times of adversity. The lyrics are transcendent, an expression of good intentions and liberation. It's got me wondering about other popular songs with lyrics that open up new circles of meaning when interpreted through ears tuned to the Word. Songs where God's hidden presence is revealed just by sitting beside us, as we cruise along listening to the music.



## *To Nun or not to Nun*

**Elizabeth Julian** (TCI – Wellington - 2017)

Recently a young woman asked me how and where I 'nunned'. She had already asked me the 'who' and 'what' questions. I said I was a sister. There was a blank look. I added, 'You know, a Catholic nun.' So that's what sparked 'nun' as a verb. I've been nunning (i.e., no sex, no money and no power) as a Sister of Mercy in Wellington since 1976, the year I also began teaching after five years at Massey University and PN Teachers College. Forty years (approx.) is a quite long time these days to spend in one commitment and ministry. How do I know if I'm in the right place? Or doing the right thing? The same way as everyone else knows. I've heard God's voice many, times. Where do I hear God's voice? God's voice comes through Scripture, the liturgy, people, creation and the events of my day. I just have to listen for it.

When I was at Teachers College and running out of excuses as to why I should not at least try religious life, I used to sit in the Palmerston North Cathedral during the afternoon. I think Margaret Mills was sometimes there at the same time thinking about the Sisters of Compassion. We probably used Kiwi, i.e., 'Yeah-Nah-Yeah' when trying to answer God's persistent niggles. My cousin, Richard Shortall, had joined the Jesuits a couple of years earlier. The three of us are all religious today trying to live out the gospel according to the charism of our congregations. What does that mean?

At my baptism in the PN Cathedral I was anointed as priest, prophet and king. I am called to the same holiness as all the baptised. Like all the baptised I am called to proclaim and witness to, the death and resurrection of Jesus wherever I am. However, as a religious I live out that call in a different way.

I've heard God's  
voice many times

I have professed publicly, visibly and forever that God can fulfil the longings of my heart. That is my vow of celibacy.

My vow of poverty shows that it is possible to live through sharing resources rather than accumulating wealth.

My vow of obedience means I am committed to discerning with other Sisters of Mercy God's voice in the midst of all the voices around me.

These three vows are not ends in themselves. They are ways to help me be about God's reign for the sake of the world. They help me keep the God question and the questions of God on the front burner whether I'm in pottering in the garden, at work, or buying groceries.

Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, was a woman of wild and daring imaginings who accomplished amazing things for the poor of Dublin. I wonder if she thinks I should be more wild and daring in my nunning.

## *God on my iPod*

**Jo Bell** (TCI/NCRS – Dunedin - 2018)

I was out for a quick run listening to a reflection on my ipod about seeing Jesus in everyone we meet. Feeling slightly smug as I consider myself good at this, I spotted a lady walking in front of me. I was drawn to her, as she had her head down and seemed to be dragging her feet. I ran past her and glanced at her teary face, and kept on running. I internalized a conversation about the irony of the situation, and chose to stop.

I asked if I could walk with her for a while she said she was fine but was happy to share the footpath. We walked in silence for a moment then I said I was happy to listen if she wanted to talk. She looked at me with a sad, disbelieving face. 'Why?' she asked, I couldn't answer that. I was just following a feeling.

I was just following a feeling

A few more steps on she began to share her story of heart-break, drugs, rehab mistrust, addiction and her son and husband who had just kicked her out for the final time. She showed me her scarred arms and her sores. We sat on the footpath while she lit a cigarette. We discussed her next step, the fact that we all screw up, we are all broken but that the consequences and situations differ. We discussed real love, dignity, and self-worth. She asked for a hug so I held her for a long while. I felt her hurt, her rejection her brokenness and we cried. As I went to leave she said 'Did God send you?' I was taken aback and again I didn't know what to say, but I smiled and replied 'maybe God did, I was just listening to God on my ipod'.

## *Let the Children Come!*

**Jan MacLeod** (BOT Proprietor's Rep. – Dunedin - 2019)

At the time I was a teacher of 5 year old children in a Catholic Primary School. This particular week my class was rostered to do 'Shared Prayer' on Friday afternoon for the rest of the school and the parent community.

We were lucky to have the parish church right next-door which was the venue for this. My class of willing little ones spent time in the church with me during the week, practicing the Shared Prayer which was based on what they had been learning about Jesus in Religious Education that week. We made wonderful use of the space around the altar, practicing singing, reading prayers, dancing, acting, and displaying art. So there was lots of working noise during these preparation sessions.

Jesus is still here!

A very elderly and kindly priest lived in the adjacent presbytery. On this occasion, he came into the church while we were all there and, believing the activity to be disrespectful to the presence of Christ in the church, went to the Tabernacle and removed the consecrated Eucharist and took it somewhere else. The children didn't notice and we continued with our practice.

After the priest had left, I couldn't help smiling and whispered to myself, "Jesus is still here"!

## *A Phonecall from God...*

**Dawn Willetts** (Villa Maria College - Christchurch - 2019)

My Mother passed away 13 years ago and I wasn't there beside her as she took her last breath. Responsibility, or at least a feeling of needing to be responsible had denied me this moment. You see, in a blink of an eye, my whole family's lives had changed, and our matriarch was suddenly on her death bed being kept alive by a machine and a stubbornness that had permeated her whole existence (something I have inherited and now both my children too; a legacy that will live on in the experiences of all who encounter us.) As it became time for her to leave us, my father turned to me and asked me to go home. I remember looking at him as if he was speaking a foreign language but the imploring look of his life slowly falling apart made me realise that this was no ordinary request. He knew all too well that the next few days were going to be the toughest of all our lives and he recognised in me a strength that emotion had and would take away from him.

I remember thinking: How was I to just up and leave my Mum in her final moments? How would she feel knowing that I was not there? And it was then that I realised that Mum was always there for the living, giving freely of her time and love and that was what we needed to celebrate. That is why I needed to go home so that I was thinking logically for Dad, my sister, my grandmother, Mum's friends, over the next few days.

And so I went; not without tears, not without regret, not without a prayer for forgiveness and not without what felt like the weight of the world on my shoulders.

A sense of calm  
came over me

That night, as I waited for 'the phonecall' I drifted in and out of sleep. I remember walking into my children's rooms at one point and wondering how to explain to them the empty space that would be there once Gran had gone.

What I remember most vividly of all is the dream I had in the moments before my Mother passed away. In my dream, my sister had asked a nurse to bring in a fan as my Mother was getting too hot. My father then leant over my mother kissing her tenderly on the lips and telling her that she could pass now, that we were ready and that he loved her. At that precise moment, my mother's eyes opened and she stared at me in my dream state and smiled her all encompassing smile. Woken from my dream and dragged back into reality, my phone was ringing. As I lifted the receiver, knowing all too well the message I was about to receive, a sense of calm came over me. In that moment I realised that God had actually answered my prayers, even though not physically with her in the moment, God allowed her to let me know that she knew I was with her and she was ok with me not being in the room. This has always given me comfort.

As I walked into the hospital room in the early hours of that morning, imagine my surprise to see a fan sitting next to my Mother and my sister telling me that she had asked a nurse to bring it into the room. As she recalled Dad's final moments with Mum (a complete replica of my dream) I realised that God is always with us in those moments we ask him to be but also those when we don't know we need him. He is always there on the end of the line...



## *A Beautiful Embrace*

**Ann Kennelly** (*Aotearoa - 2019*)

One of my most precious 'religious' experiences occurred when I was in a dark chapel in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament under the beautiful Takitimu Mountains in Southland, NZ. I was struggling with a huge life choice.... the two possible choices were, either to stay or go. I was on my knees with my head in my hands.

The life I had chosen and was living was challenging. I was teaching in a two teacher Catholic school which was about an hour's drive from my accommodation. The roll was over 80 so each classroom had over forty students! There were no other support people on the staff. The school's roll included boys and girls from Year one to Form two (5 – 12 year olds) and was of course, coed. Our school was Catholic which had been the original State School of this area. It was actually a condemned building but by buying it the Dunedin Diocese was able to offer another opportunity of Catholic Primary Education for this area of Western Southland.

Profound Silence

On the evening that I felt very deeply God's presence I was kneeling in the darkened Chapel. The lights were out. The tabernacle light was burning. Profound Silence. I experienced this - A beautiful embrace from behind me. I felt elated and peaceful. Then I wondered if there was 'someone' behind me so put the light on, but as I expected, there was just me and Christ in the Sacrament. The experience was one that I still hold as a precious embrace from God.

## *The Holy Spirit Plays in the Front Row*

**Paul Shannon** (*RE Advisor - Hamilton - 2019*)

One Sunday morning late in April, having just completed breakfast after attending morning Mass at St Joseph's in Upper Hutt, a young 21 year old was over the moon. He had heard his name called out over the radio (as was traditional in those days) by the Chairman of the New Zealand Rugby Union that he had been selected as a member of the Junior All Blacks team to tour Australia. They would play for the first time in history a game against the All Blacks the Saturday before they departed on their tour in May.

The young man was completing his final year of law at Victoria University and had been a passionate member of Marist St Pats Rugby club for a number of years - in fact the club had three of its senior team members selected for the Junior All Black touring team that year. The other two became established All Blacks.

In an effort to celebrate this occasion a club dinner was arranged in honour of those selected to be held after the All Blacks and Junior All Blacks game at Athletic Park. Unknown to the club members also invited were the current All Black selectors and the Chairman of New Zealand Rugby Jack Sullivan also a Catholic. A special guest speaker by the name of Tom Pearce, Chairman of the Auckland Regional Authority and a former Chairman of the NZ Rugby Union, was also invited. A rugby stalwart in the traditional sense.

The young man had been asked by the club management to speak on behalf of the selected players. Little did he know the impact the dinner would have on his rugby career?

The guest speaker was called upon to speak at the end of the meal. He proceeded to lambast all those people who were opposed to us playing rugby with South Africa especially those “long haired drug addicts from the universities”. He received a standing ovation and the young man was then invited to speak on behalf of the selected players.

The younger speaker approached the rostrum and thanked the club for the financial support the selected players had received. I know he hesitated, and knew that his team mates were aware that his views were in direct contrast to those of the guest speaker. What was he to do, what would Jesus do? He felt this overwhelming urge from within, which he could only describe as the Holy Spirit telling him that he must ignore any possible consequences to his rugby career and must say what he believed was right and not let the opportunity pass by. I know this because I was that young man, I was in my black blazer living the dream of every young rugby player. I spoke words without planning what I was saying they just came out without me thinking. It was divine intervention.

### The Holy Spirit telling him...

The Monday morning Dominion quoted me as being a product of both Catholic primary and secondary schools and belonging to a rugby club within the Catholic tradition. I was firmly of the view that there was morality in sport as it was in all other elements of life and a team selected on racial grounds was amoral and by playing such a team - and knowing this - was tantamount to accepting and endorsing the amoral selection process. I could not make myself available to play such a team.

The reaction was immediate! An individual, I think a cleric, tried to drag me from the stage and I was booed from the clubrooms after the club chairman tried to restore order. The All Black selectors and Chair of the New Zealand Rugby Union left immediately declaring they were insulted and they would never return to the club.

The following evening the club chairman rang to tell me he privately agreed with my stand. The New Zealand Council of Churches wrote to me congratulating me on my stand. New Zealand rugby invited South Africa to tour the following year. The Prime Minister Norman Kirk declined to allow the South African team to tour the following year over concerns for public safety.

The next South African rugby tour took place in 1981 after Prime Minister Robert Muldoon declined to cancel on the basis that politics should not be involved in sport.

## *Jesus Opens the Door*

**Jan MacLeod** (Mercy Parish - Dunedin - 2019)

As I headed towards the church doors one Sunday morning, white cane in one hand, bag on my back and walking with a distinct weakness on one side due to a stroke many years ago, Madison, a primary-school age girl, came running out to meet me. We didn't know each other beforehand. She had seen me from inside the glass doors of our church and wanted to know if she could help me.

Here was Jesus as a child happily reaching out to offer care. What a special way to begin Sunday Mass with the door being held open for me by a happy smiling young parishioner! God reveals Godself in the loveliest of ways.

Here was Jesus

## *Walking with Angels*

**Margaret Bearsley** (Wellington - 2020)

The Scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian, abound with stories of people's physical encounters with God. Often, the God-encounter is mediated through one or more Angels. Angels, as we know, are messengers of God, so there's a certain logic in this mediation, given that God is, well, the immensity of God.

After my husband had been ill for nine years, it came to the point where I knew that death must be fairly imminent. However, I was working fulltime in a demanding senior legal position, with a not very sympathetic boss. I was terribly worried that my husband would die while I was at work, and yet I felt that I couldn't ask to take time off work to sit and wait with him.

Something else that was eating away at me was that my husband was an 'ex' Catholic and he was quite superstitious. We hadn't been married in the Church, as he was divorced. Everything for his impending trip into eternity seemed out of whack. What if he went to Hell, as fundamentalists around me seemed to be predicting? This worry just piled misery on top of misery for me.

And then the Angels came! I just somehow knew that my husband would die within the week when I heard, with my mind's 'ear' the beating of Angels' wings. Just one or two at first, but day by day more and more of them. And I also 'heard' them whispering to each other, more and more excitedly, as the day approached. By the time the physical sign appeared on him, of marbling of the skin, which I had been told would appear around 24 hours before death, there was a veritable chorus of Angels waiting in the wings to take my husband home. So I knew the day to take leave from work to be with him.

Love is something  
you do

Did I see the Angels? Well, kind of, in my mind's 'eye', yes. Particularly one who had a rather Michelangelo-Italian looking face. I still search through the Columban Calendar every year when a new one comes out, as I'm sure I've seen that face before. Maybe one of the classical artists had also seen it.

If God's messengers were the powerful encounter with the divine that I experienced at the time of my husband's death, in a more ordinary and gentle way I saw the actual face of God every day of the long ordeal of my husband's illness. Enduring the daily grind of his institutionalised life brought home to me the depth of my love for my husband. I discovered through endurance that love is something you *do*. My one regret is that I had not loved him so profoundly when he was well.

As Fantine sings, in the musical production of Les Misérables: *To love another person is to see the face of God.*

When we love another with all our heart and would make any sacrifice for them, we see God, who is Love itself. We walk with Angels every day.

## *Invitation*

*(You are warmly invited to add a story or account of your own, 200-500 words. Please send it to Colin MacLeod – [c.macleod@tci.ac.nz](mailto:c.macleod@tci.ac.nz). The material will be made freely available through NCRS and TCI circles and, as usual, the editor retains the right to publish but will definitely correspond with you. Join the journey. ☺)*