**Repentance – What do we need to leave behind?**

***Talk to Chester Diocesan Clergy Conference May 2022***

My mother has always had a profound and wholly admirable loathing for any sort of domestic chore. She’s not lazy. In fact the very opposite. I often wish she would think, speak out, act, form opinions, write to her MP and drink gin much more slowly. She just loathes washing, washing up, cleaning, ironing, emptying the bins and so on with a particular intensity.

So one day when I was in the Cub Scouts and won a Housekeeping Badge for correctly ironing a pocket handkerchief, she cashed in on this rare success immediately. ‘I am proud of you, my son, you have done well,’ she said. ‘And as a reward, from now on you can iron all your own pocket handkerchiefs. And your own shirts. And your own shorts. And in fact you can do everyone else’s ironing too.’ And true to her word, she has not ironed a single item from that day to this. Fortunately I had the foresight to bunk off the Cub Scout meeting when we were doing the cookery badge.

Imagine my surprise then when, for some mid-childhood birthday, she gave me a jumper which she had knitted herself. Let me repeat those words. A jumper she had knitted herself. It was a fetching shade of electric blue and I loved it deeply and wore it constantly, so much so that a few weeks later it was stinking and covered in sufficient forensic evidence to determine every meal from the previous fortnight. So, sensibly and independently, I popped it in the washing machine, set the programme to high and clicked start. Two hours later the jumper would have struggled to contain a new born baby. I had shrunk my mother’s lovingly hand-knitted jumper. And the pain is still with me today.

Shrinking that jumper has, though, prepared me for a lifetime of Christian ministry. Because as Christians we have a wonderful gift for shrinking things. For a start we shrink our symbols. Our vast baptismal pools, evocative of death and new life, we have shrunk to be weedy little ash trays with barely enough water to put out a fag. Our anointings with oil that should run down the head and drip onto the floor we have shrunk to be a barely visible pathetic splodge on the forehead. Our Eucharistic liturgies that should be great and joyful feasts of love we have shrunk to be mean and samey and dully minimalist.

And we shrink our vocabulary too. The Gospel which should transform every aspect of our life we shrink to be mere intellectual acceptance of a trite verbal formula. The Church, the whole community of the redeemed in every time and place, we shrink to be the Jesus fan club as if it were a wholly voluntary gathering of the like-minded. And we have done the same with the word repentance. In fact repentance might be the word that has most grievously been a victim to the Christian tendency to shrink things. That’s why it has become a rarely used word. That’s why, instead of pulling something out of the dolly bag, I have had to write this talk from scratch. ‘Repent’ is the very first challenge posed both by Jesus and by John the Baptist. Yet I have never before been asked to speak on it. We’ve shrunk it so much that it barely even exists any more.

The problem, I think, is that we have shrunk repentance by associating it too exclusively with shame and private wrongdoing. I attended a church school with a strict and vicious headmaster who used to love to convict children of lying or laziness or disobedience and then would shame us publicly. We’d be told off in assembly or made to stand against walls, all the time being lectured about sin and repentance. I’m sure none of this happens these days, but it instilled into us the idea that repentance was all about facing up to private moral errors, feeling sorry and ashamed and embarrassed for what you have done and being punished for it. And it’s not just 1970’s primary schools. Every single Christian tradition bears some culpability for restricting what repentance is all about, associating it with a forensic and detailed picking over the past, feeling guilty and bad about yourself in the hope that this will bring you to the point where you will acknowledge your need of God.

Having shrunk its meaning we quite inevitably feel awkward about repentance. When new people turn up at church we feel a bit embarrassed about telling them that they need to renounce their lives of sin and wickedness and repent, even if it’s true. Committed Christians often state their resentment of being told to repent again and again and again in sackcloth and ashes when they are trying their best. And so we try not to think too much about repentance. We rush the penitential rites at the start of the service as if it’s all a bit awkward and never give any proper time for self-examination. We have nearly killed off the confessional by making out that it’s what Roman Catholics do, even though it is a recommended practice in the Book of Common Prayer.

Even more dangerously we just cancel repentance altogether. Part of my work is to interview potential ordinands at the start and end of the discernment process and I usually ask them what the good news is. Very few ever mention repentance. But most will speak about love. The good news is a God who loves us unconditionally and that’s all that needs to be said, they tell me earnestly. The implication is that we don’t need repentance, we don’t need conversion, we don’t especially need change of life. We just need to know that we’re loved. And so the cross, rather than being the sacrifice that atones for sin, becomes a mere sign of that unconditional love.

The trouble is that just won’t do. We’re selling the Gospel short. Jesus says at the start of his ministry, repent. John the Baptist does the same. Peter and Paul in their work of mission call hearers to repentance. If this is what Jesus and his early followers proclaimed we have a problem. We can’t just cancel repentance, inconvenient though it is, because to do so is to imperil people’s salvation. Jesus says repent. If we are to be faithful followers we need to repent and we need to call others to repentance. Rather than cancelling repentance, what we need to do is unshrink the word. We need to recover its original meaning. And we need to do that using the Scriptures.

In the passage from Mark Chapter 1 that has inspired the thematic development of this conference, Jesus calls Simon and Andrew to repent. And to do so they leave behind their nets, the symbol of their old way of life, and they follow Jesus. I want to look at a passage that is not dissimilar to that but which is drawn from the Gospel of St John and is one of the resurrection appearances.

We all know the background to this story because we have just lived it liturgically in Holy Week. Despite furious pledges of loyalty, Peter denies Jesus three times on the night before he goes to his death. Between those denials and that death, Peter has no contact at all with Jesus, no chance to apologise or make amends. Many of us here know from funeral ministry of the impact of unresolved guilt in exacerbating the pain of grief, and Peter must have felt desolate in the days after the cross. Until this happens.

***15****When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’****16****A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’****17****He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.****18****Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’****19****(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’*

‘Do you love me more than these?’ That’s the first question. What does Jesus mean by that? Shakespeare’s tragedy King Lear begins with the monarch calling his three daughters to himself and he divides the land amongst them according to how much each declares her love. The greater the pronouncement of love, the more land they are given. It is a kind of love competition which ends up disastrously for everyone involved. Jesus here seems to be doing exactly the same, setting up a competition between Peter and the other disciples. Peter do you love me more than John? More than Andrew? More than Thaddaeus? Peter are you the love champion?!

Until you think of the setting. In the light of his denial, Peter and some others have given up on following Jesus and returned to their old way of life back in the north on the Sea of Galilee. They have just been fishing. So they are speaking surrounded by the tackle, the nets, the boats, the gear of the fisherman. Peter do you love me more than these? Jesus asks, and as he does so surely what he is pointing to the symbols of that old way of life, the boats, the nets. Peter, do you love me more than your old lifestyle? Do you love me even more than your former life here in the calm and safety of Galilee? Are you going to go backwards to this old life symbolised by these old nets, or forwards to the new life into which I am calling you? That surely is the question.

‘Yes Lord you know I love you,’ replies Peter. Three replies for three denials because this is first and foremost a repentance scene. But what is interesting is that Jesus makes no mention of Peter’s terrible denials on the night of the cross. He doesn’t take him back to that moment of acute personal failure for even a single second. He doesn’t remind, rebuke, embarrass, punish. He has no interest at all in Peter’s shame. All he wants is Peter’s love. Because repentance is that act of turning around to accept a new life in Jesus. To repent is to turn away from an old way of life and accept a new life in Jesus Christ.

So where does the sin come into it? Of course Peter sinned. Here he is forgiven. But Jesus doesn’t just ask him to turn away from sin. He asks him to turn away from the nets and boats. Now there is nothing sinful about working as a fishermen. Repentance includes turning away from sin. But the word is infinitely deeper and richer than that. It is about turning away from an old lifestyle, an old way of being, an old career and orientating one’s life wholly on Jesus Christ. To repent is to live for him alone and, as the sunflower turns to orientate itself in the direction of the sun, to bathe wholly and exclusively in his light. Repentance is about a radical re-orientation of every aspect of one’s humanity upon Christ.

We’ve just been reading our way through Ephesians in the lectionary for Evening Prayer. I was struck as I read it through by a constant repeated formula that Paul uses. “You were once… But now…” You were dead, but now you are alive in Christ. You were once far away, now you have been brought near by the blood of Christ. You were once foreigners and strangers, now you are fellow citizens. “You were once… But now…” It is a way of contrasting two totally different ways of life, before and after Christ, before and after that repentance which is the turning towards Christ. “You were once… But now…” That’s repentance. Repentance is that utterly profound and far-reaching change that Jesus works in us through his Holy Spirit. It is our human co-operation in those processes by which we are re-engineered, re-created, literally made anew.

We so often accept the narrative that the Gospel is some kind of bolt-on extra to the human person. Here is a woman or a man and we stick on the Gospel as an adjunct so that they feel a bit better about themselves. Human being 2.0. Now with added Jesus. You are who you always were. It’s just that now you go to church, or pray, or live for ever. But that doesn’t even touch the profundity of what Jesus does for us. The Gospel is not a new app on your phone. It’s not even a new operating system. It’s a whole new phone. That’s the fruit of repentance. Nothing is the same again. We are the new creation.

Now for holiday Boast Alert 1. After Easter I went on a wonderful walking holiday in the Umbrian and Sabine Hills of central Italy and we walked in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi. The story we heard was the most amazing tale of repentance. Francis was a typical brash young man in the wealthy town of Assisi in the twelfth century. He was a soldier and relished going into battle with the neighbouring city of Perugia. He loved fine clothes and eating and drinking. Like everyone else he hated lepers and the poor and was scornful of them. What mattered to him was his brash image as a warrior and a drinker.

But then he was hit by a terrible crisis when he found himself not wanting to fight. He was spurned as a coward and a traitor and spent days wondering the hills until he found himself in the ruined chapel of San Damiano. There he saw a beautiful and ancient painted cross, and he heard the figure speak to him and say, ‘Rebuild my church which as you can see has fallen into ruins.’

From that moment every single aspect of his life was changed as he became a warrior for Christ. He went into the centre of town and (to his father’s utter horror) stripped naked, replacing the clothes of the wealthy man about town with a simple brown robe in order that he might be clothed like the cross. He lived in utter simplicity in a chapel on the plain, over time joined by others who wished to share in his life of evangelical piety. Together they rebuilt ruined churches and then, when they realised that it was the church spiritual that Jesus wanted them to rebuild, wondered around neighbouring towns to preach the faith. Most dramatically of all the man who once hated lepers went to live alongside the lepers, sharing every aspect of their lives, becoming poor and destitute as were they.

That is repentance. Not a narrow renunciation of private wrongdoing, not whipping up a sense of shame about the past. No, it’s about turning away from an old way of life and embracing a wholly new one. It means allowing oneself to be evangelised through and through so that your whole being shines out brightly with the glory of Jesus. That’s unshrunken repentance.

And the amazing thing about this unshrunken repentance is that it’s not about becoming someone else. It’s about being fully you. It’s time for Holiday Boast Alert 2. I was in Berlin a couple of weeks ago with my nephews and we went to the Chapel of the Reconciliation which is on Bernauer Straße. When the Berlin Wall was erected in 1961, the old church found itself in the strip of no man’s land between East and West and was destroyed. After the wall was dismantled in 1990 a new church was built and was done so using the actual concrete that was used to build the wall. The very stuff that once was used as a barrier to symbolise hatred, fear and division has been redeployed to be a symbol of reconciliation, peace and love. That’s what repentance achieves. It creates the space where Jesus can redeploy the very stuff of our humanity so that these frail and broken bodies of ours become the Body of Christ, his own living and eternal presence. Through repentance we find our true purpose, our true dignity, our true selves.

You were once… But now… What then might this unshrunken repentance mean for us who are the church today? What might it mean to turn away from our nets and follow Jesus? Let me suggest some ideas. In so doing we will briefly examine what the nets are like, in others words what we are turning from. Then we will explore what the new life in Christ might constitute.

So first of all what about our lives of prayer? Too many Christians in the west are spiritual puddles whose lives of prayer are muddy and shallow. Repentance means us becoming vast and beautiful spiritual reservoirs, overflowing with that living water which is the life of Jesus within us.

Remember St Francis who initiated that vast movement of renewal and reform in the church of his day. The impact of his life is almost unmeasurable. But at its heart lay a small band of people utterly committed to their own spiritual lives and their own ongoing conversion. That same principle is true of every single movement of renewal in the history of the church. At its heart is a band of hardcore prayer warriors who live the disciplines of prayer especially when it’s tough to do so. Think of the Celtic Saints whom we so much love to idealise. Their praying was serious and hardcore. Go to the north sea coast, stand up to your neck in sea water whilst reciting the whole Psalter in Latin from memory and then you’ll experience true Celtic spirituality. Or again at the heart of the life of the architects of the Oxford Movement which recovered Parish life in the nineteenth century was a level of commitment to the devotional life that puzzled colleagues. They restored practices such as regular fasting and the confessional to Anglican spiritual life and were profoundly committed to constant, daily prayer. Bear the fruit worthy of repentance, John the Baptist said to those who came to him at the Jordan, and the first of those fruits is prayer.

By comparison our spiritual life in the Church of England is all too often tepid and weedy. Many don’t know how to pray. Many pray only if they have time. Plenty hardly pray at all. There’s even a button now on the daily prayer app so you can just press play and let someone else do all the work for you. Few believe that prayer can actually change things. We can just about accept that prayer might change us, but any notion that prayer can transform the tectonic plates or blow situations apart seems a bit hot-headed and scary to your typical respectable Anglican.

Have you ever wondered why the Church of England has been talking about growth for fifty years and has seen nothing but decline? Have you ever wondered why, for all our resources, initiatives, projects, ideas and strategies, weekly attendance continues to fall by around 2% a year? There are two reasons in my view. And the first is that we have forgotten how to pray. You can talk the language of renewal all you like. But if our prayer life is a puddle it’s all words. We need to repent. We need to turn away from being prayer puddles and become vast and deep prayer reservoirs.

That means that our prayer needs to be disciplined. Slotting prayer into the bits of day available to us once work and family commitments are done is no good. Praying whilst we drive or walk the dog or take a shower, this is not enough. Prayer needs to be the fixed point around which the rest of our diary is built. That’s what Jesus did – everything sprang from times of prayer. How come we think we know better?

It means our prayer needs to be penitential. Repentance means a desire to embrace a new life, but that will never happen all at once. There will be times when we fall, when we prefer our old way of life, when we deny or when we close off areas of our life to God. So penitence needs to be a daily part of our praying, perhaps last thing at night in the examen. And for many it could mean recovering the liberating practice of confession.

Above all becoming prayer reservoirs means our prayer needs to be determined. Remember the wonderful story of the dishonest judge who listens to the widow because she goes on and on. Or the man who eventually gets out of bed to give his friend bread because it’s the only way to shut him up. We need to persevere in prayer and keep going even when it seems hard or pointless or unanswered. Prayers from the place of dryness are often the most effective.

So that’s the first aspect of unshrunken repentance – being reservoirs for prayer. But then next what about our evangelism? What does repentance mean here? It means we need to move from declinism to deeper conversion.

When I was at theological college we learnt a great deal about heresy. Or at least about the heresies of the past. Gnosticism. Pelagianism. Arianism. Marcionism. Nestorianism and so on. Many of those gripped hold of the church very tightly and appeared to have won the day. But heresy always burns away eventually in the heat of Gospel truth, like dew in the morning sun.

What though about the present? What is today’s heresy? In the church in western Europe, I would suggest that it’s declinism. My colleague, Bishop Jill Duff, has written a paper on the subject which is on our Diocesan website.

Declinism is the easy presumption that we have lost the battle for the Christian soul of the nation and so that the future is inevitably a smaller church with fewer congregations, fewer people and fewer clergy. It is a heresy because it presumes that the Holy Spirit is no longer present in his church. It presumes that the Gospel no longer has the power to change lives, as if the sophisticated western mind has seen through it. And declinism is skilfully fed by all sorts of people: by the number crunchers who think that truth is what is contained on a spreadsheet, by those Diocesan strategies that claim boldly to be missional but which are really decline plans, by those miserable academics and theologians who see it as their task to undermine the church’s mission rather than resource it.

Like the Arians and the Pelagians, the declinists can be very convincing. They appear to have cold logic behind them. And so unsurprisingly declinism has taken hold in large parts of the church. I was speaking to a small and ageing congregation about our plans to renew Christian life in their town centre church. Imagine, I said, this church building full of young adults and families. Imagine it buzzing and alive. They looked at me as though I were bonkers. They literally couldn’t imagine church life in any form other than what they knew. It was beyond their capacity. But guess what? That church is indeed now full of young adults and families.

We see declinism in our church buildings as we reduce worship space and opt for bland and tiny multi-purpose spaces. We see it in our loss of nerve in engaging with the world of culture and the arts and in the denial of the place of beauty in worship. We see it in the fear of faithful congregations who wonder if they’ll ever get a vicar again or who they’ll be ‘put in with’ as if the life of their church is in the hands of others. We see it in the spirit of nostalgia that suggests that the church’s best years are behind us and that we need to fall back on our past rather than joyfully embrace God’s future.

How do we respond to declinism? What does repentance mean here? It means consciously seeking our own deeper conversion to Christ. Evangelism in an age of declinism is generally motivated by institutional anxiety. We think we need a bigger congregation to maintain the building or pay the bills or to help us live in an imagined past. But evangelism motivated by the desire to prop up the institutional church will never get us anywhere. Who wants to be part of an anxious, backward looking organisation? The only proper motive for evangelism is joy, a joy motivated by the richness of our own life in Jesus Christ. So the way to counter declinism is to offer our lives ever more fully to Jesus and to encourage those we serve to do exactly the same.

We have fallen for the trap of thinking that evangelism is something that we do and so is all about learning the right techniques or adopting the latest approaches or resources. But evangelism is something that flows from the quality of our life in Christ. If he really is alive in us and if we have really offered our lives to him, we will bear witness each day without ever much having to think about it. Of course the resources are great, especially nurture courses and new congregations. But they will come to nothing if the quality of our life in Christ is thin.

So unshrunken repentance means consciously renouncing declinism and naming that lie that we are part of a bust and dying church. Because be sure, that is a lie. Repent of that and embrace deeper conversion to Jesus Christ. Offer ever more of your life to him, for then sharing the new life you have found in him will become as natural for you as it was for Mary Magdalene or Philip or Peter.

So unshrunken repentance means moving from declinism to deeper conversion. Then third, what about the area of justice? Here we need to move from apathy to action. The first Christians stood out in a crowded market place of faiths and philosophies because of the way they cared for the poor and the destitute. Francis made his mark because he went to live with the lepers and, when he met a poor beggar, gave him everything and took his place. Vincent de Paul revived the French church of his day by preaching to galley slaves and prisoners. The Wesleyan revival made its mark because they preached to the urban poor and to forgotten rural dwellers. No one took much notice of the Oxford Movement until its clergy started to plant into the teeming slums of industrial revolution cities and its religious orders began to nurse cholera victims in London and Plymouth. What do you notice here? If the first mark of a church seeking revival is prayer, the second is a passion for justice and a heart for the poor.

Yet we are part of a Church of England that has taken a long-term chronic preferential option for the rich. The evidence is all too obvious. Look at the grotesque inequity between the historic assets of dioceses, modelling in our common life the inequality we so freely condemn when we see it elsewhere. Look at our long-term failures to call people from working class backgrounds into leadership. Look how much easier it is to fill an opulent parish in the South-east than a working class Parish in the north. And again and again when diocese want to cut back clergy posts, it is the most deprived areas that take the hit.

What’s more we don’t really seem to care all that much. The main response to such injustice is passivity or apathy. General Synod for example loves rousing speeches about a bias to the poor and will go on cheering loudly right until that point when they realise that there is a price to pay in terms of money or power if we are going to address it.

Look by contrast at the ministry of Jesus. Again and again and again he doesn’t just take the side of the poor and marginalised, he places them right at the very centre. He chooses the peasant woman, Mary, to be his mother. He picks on the filthy, lawless shepherds to be the first to witness his birth. He sets free the woman bound with a disability so that she stands at the heart of the community and sings God’s praises. He blesses the children and puts them in the midst of the community. And on and on and on.

So why do we think we know better? A renewed church must be a repentant church, and that means repenting of our tolerance of injustice and our failures to address poverty. It means turning our apathy into action. And that must have a cost. We need our best leaders in our poorest communities. We need to be raising up UKME and working class priests and lay leaders and setting them free to lead as they are called. We need to be re-investing and re-planting in those urban communities we have abandoned and under-resourced. Every single church needs to ask and answer the question, ‘How are we good news for the poor?’ Tinkering and classic Anglican tokenism won’t do. If we want a nation renewed under Christ that will start in our most deprived communities. That’s where renewal will come from, and if as Anglicans we continue to pull out of such areas and under-invest in them, then Jesus will simply find another set of people to declare his Gospel. Because when we proclaim good news to the poor everybody listens.

So unshrunken repentance means we move from apathy to action in our desire for justice. What then about our approach to creation? There in our repentance we need to move from entitlement to thankfulness. In Genesis 26:1 God gives humanity ‘dominion’ over creation. Over the centuries that word has been used as an excuse for human despoliation of creation. We have treated God’s world as if it were ours to plunder at will, regardless of the consequence. We need to accept that much of the current environmental catastrophe we are living with today springs from poor Christian theology and the conviction that the world is our property as human beings.

Which means that a renewed theology of creation is essential if Christians are to lead the way in a new and sustainable relationship between humanity and a planet which is showing all the signs that it is unwilling to tolerate us for much longer. Dominion can no longer mean control. It must mean responsibility, care, stewardship. And that means a profound thankfulness for a creation which we know is not property to plunder but gift to delight in. When we are thankful for the land and thankful for nature, then we acknowledge that it is not ours, but God’s gift to us.

And thankfulness leads to action. We need to get beyond tokenism and start modelling simpler and more sustainable lifestyles. One of the few times I have felt proud of General Synod was when it rebelled to bring the carbon zero target form 2045 to 2030, a real sign of a change of heart. And that is something which must impact every parish, every school, every expression of church.

So there are some examples of unshrunken repentance. In prayer, from puddles to reservoirs. In evangelism, from declinism to conversion. In justice from apathy to action. In creation, from entitlement to thankfulness. I could go on and on, but I want to start a conversation not shut one down. What might unshrunken repentance mean for you as a priest or for the church or chaplaincy where you serve? What are the nets you are being called from? What is the new life Jesus wants you to embrace?

And remember above all that this is a path of joy. It’s interesting that every story of repentance in the Gospels is marked with bucket loads of joy. Not guilt or shame or anxiety, but joy. The shepherd who finds his sheep. Zacchaeus who find delight in new generosity. The thief who finds salvation in the cross. The father who recovers his two lost sons. In all these stories there is joy and partying. Because repentance means renouncing that despair which is so much part of the human condition and allowing ourselves to be soaked through and through with the joy of the Gospel, the joy of knowing Christ. And in the end it is our joy, not our anxiety or our desperation or even our enthusiasm that will capture imaginations with the Gospel, but that deep, rich joy we find in Christ and only in him. Turn around! Repent of despair! Turn towards the Gospel of joy. Let your communities, no matter how large or small they are, be above all communities of joy.

Let me wind up with a story. When I worked in Hartlepool I had a parishioner called Janice. She was a sensible, no nonsense women bringing up two children and with a heartfelt and sincere faith. She did however have one overpowering fear which was of lifts. She was convinced that if she ever got in a lift it would get stuck between floors, the door would open and she would be left staring at a bare concrete wall.

One day Janice and her husband ditched the kids with granny and went on a lastminute.com bucket holiday to Spain. They arrived in the small hours of the morning to discover that their room was at the very top of a vast tower block hotel and they were carrying with them huge amounts of luggage. ‘Let’s get in the lift,’ said Janice’s husband. ‘No way,’ said Janice. ‘It will get stuck and the doors will open and I’ll find myself staring at a bare concrete wall.’ But they were so tired that in the end Janice’s husband prevailed.

They got in the lift. They pressed the button. The lift went up and up. Then there was an almighty crunch and the lift suddenly stopped moving. The doors opened. And there in front of them was a bare, concrete wall. They were stuck between floors.

It is one thing to have a phobia. It is quite another to have that phobia richly and vividly fulfilled. So Janice did what any intelligent person would have done in such circumstances. She panicked and screamed. Despite the noise, her husband recovered his calm, pressed the button and the lift started to move again back to the ground floor. Janice burst out to the reception desk, highly emotional, and said to the receptionist, ‘The lift! It doesn’t work! It got stuck! There was a just a bare wall!’ And with utter calm the receptionist asked, ‘Why didn’t you turn round?’

You see it was a lift with two sets of doors. On one side a bare wall. But if they had turned round, on the other side were bedrooms, lounges, bars, restaurants, a rich life of leisure being lived.

Why don’t you turn round? Life without Jesus is life looking at a wall. What you see is what you get. Life has no possibility, no potential, no joy beyond that which you can achieve through your own efforts. And when it’s over, it’s over. Repent says Jesus. Turn round. Look the other way, look in his way. For then you will discover a new life so much richer and more vivid and more wonderful than anything we could possibly imagine. For then what you will discover is the nothing less than the kingdom.

“The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.”

**Philip North**

*May 2022*