



CHATTING ABOUT GOD

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PREFACE

These dialogues are short plays, mostly with two characters, in a variety of locations where people might be sitting, waiting for something. Sometimes they know each other and sometimes they are strangers. As they chat they hit upon some topic about religion and faith, and they generally have quite different views.

These were developed to be performed as part of the worship in the Eastwood Uniting Church in Sydney, in place of the sermon. They were written by Christopher Cooper and the minister, Nicholas Fried and mostly performed by the two of us. Please note that the views expressed by our characters do not necessarily reflect our own views. But these little sketches explore questions about our faith. The answers need to be supplied by the reader, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

IN RUMBLES CAFÉ

SCENE: *A café.*

DAVE: Mind if I sit down here?

ALEX (*writing*): That's fine – it's busy here at the Lakeside Café this morning.

DAVE: I hope I'm not interrupting your work.

ALEX: No, it's fine. It's not exactly work – I'm writing a few ideas about how long it takes for someone to feel they belong somewhere.

DAVE: That's an interesting subject. Is that what you are interested in?

ALEX: Yes, although there is a particular reason. There are quite a few new people coming to my church and I'm thinking about some of the ways they can feel they belong.

DAVE: You have your own Church?

ALEX: No I mean the Church I go to.

DAVE: Which Church is that?

ALEX: Oh, I go along to Eastwood Uniting Church up the road there on the corner.

DAVE: So do I. I like the morning service very much. Always something interesting happening. I don't recall seeing you there. But, there again, I'm quite new. I've only been going there for about six months.

ALEX: Well, you won't see me in the morning. I go along in the evening – to One Heart. That's my type of church.

DAVE: Oh, that explains why I've never seen you there. You know, I've always thought it funny that they call it church, like Eastwood Uniting *Church*, when "church" refers to just the building. We should call ourselves by a name that refers to the people. What do you think is the best collective name for a group of people who go along to church, a group of worshippers – you know, like a pride of lions or a herd of elephants?

ALEX: Good question. Well, I've always thought that "faith community" works well.

DAVE: Naw, I don't like that.

ALEX: Why not?

DAVE: It makes me think of those way-out religious communes in America. Slightly strange and wacky groups.

ALEX: I rather like the word “community”? For me it captures the fact that we have something in common with one another, that we share a common purpose. And putting “faith” in front defines and explains what it is we have in common, that is our faith.

DAVE: Yes, but it seems too weak a word for my liking. I live in the community of Eastwood, but I don’t feel I share a common purpose with my neighbours. I think I’d prefer “family”. It’s much closer. I mean ... if my neighbour was on a kidney machine I might volunteer to mow his lawn for him, but I doubt if I’d donate a kidney to him! But for a close family member, I might. You see, “family” is much closer than “community”.

ALEX: Yes, but I have a lot of difficulty with the word “family”. When our extended family gets together for a special event like a wedding or at Christmas it’s like you need to have a degree in walking on eggshells. Mention ‘family’ and I immediately think about my uncle Neville – he has the capacity to start a fight with anyone at the drop of a hat.

DAVE: Yes, I have an aunt who's a bit like that. Everyone in my family wonders who she takes after. The general consensus is that she must have been switched at the hospital. She's a nightmare.

ALEX: And also, while some people have very happy families, other people may not have a family at all, and so talking about the church as a family might be very painful for them.

DAVE: But that's why Church family is good. It means that no matter what our biological families are like we have a church family. You wouldn't want to deny people that would you?

ALEX: But I still reckon that 'family' can be a word that can exclude people. If you come from a happy family then it may not be so obvious. But if mention of family reminds you straightaway of abuse, or violence, or something else profoundly negative and painful it's not such a good word for a church. It brings up all those memories and emotions.

DAVE: But it's good to speak about people in a church being brothers and sisters.

ALEX: True but I still reckon that there are issues with calling a church a family

DAVE: Yes, I suppose you're right. I tell you what though. Some years ago I went along to the Salvation

army. They seem very comfortable and happy with the word “army”. That’s a nice strong word. Much stronger than ‘community’ – “Salvation Army”. It suggests a common purpose. And action. Everyone in an army has an active role.

ALEX: Oh no! Next you’ll be suggesting we sing “Onward Christian Soldiers”. It might have been a good name once, in its own way, but for me it’s totally inappropriate in today’s world. We’ve seen too many bad things done by armies. There was a time when much of the church language was about fighting, about taking on the enemy. I was never comfortable with that in the context of Jesus being the prince of peace. No, I don’t like ‘army’ at all.

DAVE: Fair enough. Speaking of Jesus, what about ‘flock’. Jesus used that metaphor. “I am the Good Shepherd.” Couldn’t we call ourselves a ‘flock of faith’?

ALEX: That’s a good one. I rather like that. A faith flock. Mind you everyone in church would have to look a little sheep-ish. The minister could count out his flock as they followed one another into church. Instead of people falling asleep during a sermon the minister might fall asleep counting sheep.

DAVE: Very droll!

ALEX: And if the minister was a good shepherd he or she could listen to the voice, or the bleating, of each sheep. Everyone would have a baa code that could be scanned as they came into church. Do you like that? Baa code – to see if perhaps one was missing he'd just have to scan their baa codes!

DAVE: I'm trying to be serious.

ALEX: So am I. But at the end of the day does it matter anyway. You prefer 'family', I prefer 'community'. You say 'tomayto', and I say 'tomarto'. No that doesn't work. That wasn't what I meant. As long as we all know what we mean it doesn't matter what word we use. We simply pick one that works for each of us.

DAVE: No, I think it *does* matter. Names *are* important. They can change our attitudes to things.

ALEX: OK – give me some examples. My family – that's my biological family, not my church family, had a phrase about names – “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.” Is that relevant?

DAVE: A bit, although I think you're wrong. What you call something is very important. For example, I don't know what your views are on gay marriage but for homosexual couples the word marriage is more

important to them than ‘civil union’, even if ‘civil union’ gives them the same rights as marriage.

ALEX: What’s that got to do with what we call a church?

DAVE: Well, the name ‘Methodist’ was a term of derision thrown at the early Wesleyans until they adopted it to describe themselves.

ALEX: OK, I understand that. Like the Quakers didn’t call themselves that to begin with. It started out as a joke when people saw them shaking with their fervent prayer. And now the Quakers wear the name with pride. I suppose you’re right. Perhaps names *are* important after all.

DAVE: I don’t see what’s wrong with calling ourselves a family. After all, when we pray the Lord’s Prayer we say “Our Father”. Doesn’t that make us a family?

ALEX: Not at all. That’s language about God that comes from a patriarchal society. If Jesus were around today, in real, if you know what I mean, I reckon he would use more inclusive language, like ‘parent’, or that God is like a loving mother and father.

DAVE: That’s a bit of speculation – Jesus being so politically correct. So you’ve knocked down ‘army’

and ‘family’. Apart from your ‘community’ have you got an alternative?

ALEX: I rather like ‘household’?

DAVE: I read somewhere that in the time of Jesus the word ‘father’ meant ‘head of the household’, more than just a biological thing. Apparently it was fairly normal for people to marry quite young in those days and it was not at all unusual for a boy to become a father at the age of 16. We know that Mary was only 15 when the angel came to her. I bet Joseph was not that much older. So when a boy became a father he would still be living in the household of his own father.

ALEX: That’s all very interesting, I didn’t know that.

DAVE: But Joseph and Mary didn’t live with their parents, as far as we know. I’ve just had a thought – it’s a curious thing that we never hear of Jesus’s grandparents.

ALEX: I’m sure that one of them gets a mention in a family tree somewhere – is it at the beginning of Matthew? I’m sure that was a question at a trivia night I went to once at Hillsong. That’s interesting, they don’t use church do they?

DAVE: You've digressed. You were speaking about household.

ALEX: Yes, that's right. Anyway, the word 'household' for me captures a lot of what I think the word 'family' does for you, only it's more inclusive. When I was growing up most households in our street were a Mum and a Dad and a couple of kids, what they call nowadays a nuclear family. These days household can be single people, couples simply living together; a household can be a group of uni students, or a gay couple, or a daughter and her old mother, simply the people who live in that particular building, just like a church household is comprised of the people who go along to that particular church.

DAVE: Household of faith. Yes, I could get used to that. But whatever happened to "congregation". When I was a Sunday School kid it was simple. We were a 'congregation' that worshipped in a 'church'. We had none of these fancy phrases that seem to be floating about today. The world seems to want to invent fancy names for things that had perfectly good ordinary names. I mean we used to have garbos, and now we have refuse collectors.

ALEX: Times change, and we realise that the world is more diverse. Sometimes when I tell people I live with a doctor people assume that I am gay. People often assume that doctors are male. We have to be careful that the way we speak avoids stereotypes.

DAVE: I guess so. We need to be careful about that. And sometimes using a new name for something makes us think about what assumptions we carry around with us. And also what the name means. I must admit I took a long time getting used to saying new words in the Lord's Prayer.

ALEX: Like saying 'sins' instead of 'trespasses'.

DAVE: Yes, and like 'save us from the time of trial' instead of 'lead us not into temptation'.

ALEX: I think the changes are good. The language is more relevant, easier to understand. Trespassing always used to remind me of the sign near the apple orchard on my way home from school, or the sign near the railway line.

DAVE: That one's actually still there!

ALEX: Yes, the changes certainly made me think more about the words. And that's really my point about what we call a church. Sometimes one word, whether it be a congregation or a flock is rather limiting.

DAVE: I wonder what church was called right at the beginning.

ALEX: What, you mean the first time it gets mentioned in the Bible or something?

DAVE: Yes , do you know?

ALEX: I think so. It is a word like ‘ekklesia’ from which we get ecclesiastic I suppose.

DAVE: Do you know what it means?

ALEX: The ‘ek’ bit is a prefix I think, and is Greek for ‘out’. The other part of the word I think has something to do with being called, so ekklesia is being called out. Like someone going around calling people out of their individual homes into a gathering. ‘Eastwood Ekklesia’ has a good ring to it!

DAVE: But it’s no good using a word that no-one else understands – even if it *is* a biblical word.

ALEX: True enough. Gee it’s tricky coming up with one word that works for everyone isn’t it?

DAVE: Well, maybe we should not stick with just one name for who we are, worshipping in the Eastwood Uniting Worship Centre. If we had a variety of words or phrases we might think about who we believe we are a bit more deeply, and how we relate to one another.

ALEX: But a lot of new churches that are springing up around the place don’t even have church in their name.

DAVE: Yes, one church I went to was the Church of Unity and One Mind.

ALEX: I suppose their favourite hymn is that old one with the words ‘e’en now we think and speak the same’?

DAVE: It was, but whoever wrote that never went to any of their church council meetings.

ALEX: Not a good example of unity and one mind, then.

DAVE: Unfortunately not. Always ended in a massive argument.

ALEX: Mind you, in any human community you don’t realistically expect people to be in ‘perfect harmony’. I think a certain amount of controversy is a healthy thing for a faith community.

DAVE: Or a ‘family in Christ’. Or a ‘household of faith’. Do you think we should ask if they can change the name of our church to ‘Eastwood Uniting Household of Faith’?

ALEX: We’d need a longer sign.

DAVE: Perhaps we should stick to what we’ve got. But we need to remind ourselves that we are a

congregation, not simply an *audience* in church. We interact.

ALEX: Absolutely. A church is people.

DAVE: You know I used to be very self-conscious about the ‘passing of the peace’ in church but now I’ve got used to it.

ALEX: Do you do that in the morning service? They do it in the evening. It’s OK, but I feel a bit awkward still. I’m rather shy and introvert, but I get the concept behind it.

DAVE: I used to like it when I went to a church and we went up in small groups and knelt at a communion rail. As I sat in my pew I’d think about the dozen people who were kneeling out in front and felt a part of them.

ALEX: Is that why so many people want to sit up the back? So they can see who’s there and so they can pray for them?

DAVE: Don’t know. Maybe there are lots of reasons people sit at the back. Anyway, I’d offer up a little prayer for some of them as they knelt at the communion rail, especially if I knew their problems. As it is I often don’t see some of the people who sit behind me and who skip morning tea.

ALEX: That sounds a bit weird. I'm not sure what a communion rail is, but what we do in the evening is we all have communion together. There's that word again, 'communion' must be linked with 'community'. We get to eat and drink together so there's more opportunity to feel more like a community, or a household, oh, all right, a family.

DAVE: We just have morning tea. It's OK, but you know what. Since we've started having the community morning tea – and here I'm using the word in the sense of the Eastwood community – I find it easier to talk to our own people in greater depth than with ordinary morning teas. I don't quite know what makes it different. Perhaps it's the location. Perhaps one feels like staying longer. Quite apart from the outreach possibilities I feel it's been a wonderful new idea to promote a feeling of oneness among our own people.

ALEX: So we're a community of faith ...

DAVE: ... and a family in Christ ...

ALEX: ... and even a congregation ...

DAVE: ... and an army in the service of God ...

ALEX: I'm still not too comfortable about calling ourselves an 'army'.

DAVE: We're a unique collection of people – with many different views but a common purpose. There is no other group of people quite like it. I suppose that's why we have so much trouble in finding the right phrase.

ALEX: I agree that names are important, but it's not important to use just one name or phrase.

DAVE: You're right. The important word is 'belong'. Whatever it is we belong to – a flock or a family or a fellowship ...

ALEX: ... or a community or a congregation – we *belong!*

AT THE SHEEP AND GOATS PUB

SCENE: *A bar in a pub*

BILLY: You seen the paper this morning, Vic?

VICTOR: No, mate, why?

BILLY: Your lot have made it onto the front page?

VICTOR: My lot? What do you mean?

BILLY: The church you go to.

VICTOR: (*shocked*) my Uniting Church is on the front page of the Daily Standard?

BILLY: No, not *your* Uniting Church. The Uniting Church – all of it.

VICTOR: Yes, we expected that. It's because there was the Assembly, a national meeting last week.

BILLY: You lot really get stuck into contemporary issues.

VICTOR: Yes, it's part of our DNA. We're a made up of people with very diverse views. That's what I like about it.

BILLY: Yes, but it must make it very hard when, as the paper says, there are strong differences of opinion. It looks like people in your church aren't sure what to believe.

VICTOR: That's not a problem for me.

BILLY: Why not?

VICTOR: Well, I've found that, over the years, my beliefs have changed.

BILLY: What????!! I find that hard to.....believe. I always thought that you are a person with very strong beliefs.

VICTOR: That might be how you see me, but the truth is that beliefs are often locked into a particular context.

BILLY: What do you mean?

VICTOR: Well, as an example, for about 1600 years the belief was that the sun went around the earth. Galileo's proposition was that the earth went around the sun.

BILLY: Interesting ..it's the old 'Galileo's heliocentric idea'. Carry on chief.

VICTOR: Thanks Bill. Indeed. Galileo was met with opposition within the Catholic Church, and in 1616 the Inquisition declared heliocentrism to be formally heretical. The Roman Inquisition tried Galileo in 1633 and found him 'vehemently suspect of heresy', sentencing him to indefinite imprisonment. Galileo was kept under house arrest until his death in 1642.

BILLY: And your point is?

VICTOR: That beliefs are contextual. If I'd been alive before Galileo I probably would have believed that the sun went around the earth, because that was what was taught. Now I believe differently because I live in a different context.

BILLY: That's interesting. I guess there would be quite a few things like that.

VICTOR: Yes. I might have lived in a time when I would have believed that the world was flat, or ...

BILLY: ... or that the human race wasn't created as we are now, but evolved.

VICTOR: That's an interesting one. There are some people in our church who sincerely believe that the

universe and living organisms originate from specific acts of divine creation, as in the biblical account. What do you believe?

BILLY: With my science background I'm convinced by natural processes such as evolution. But I still find it tricky, because of what's in the Bible. I'm comfortable believing that God created evolution.

VICTOR: I would imagine there are many people who believe certain things because of what's in the Bible, or what they were taught at some point. And people can end up believing in creationism or evolution, or, as you do, in both!!!

BILLY: What about other beliefs that have changed? Do you think that if you'd lived at a different time you might have believed it was OK for people to have slaves, or not appropriate to give women the vote in elections?

VICTOR: I think I would have been against slaves.

BILLY: And giving women the vote?

VICTOR: I'm not sure. I would like to think that I would have supported the right for women to vote.

BILLY: Even if your church believed differently?

VICTOR: Yes.

BILLY: Why?

VICTOR: That issue is not so much about beliefs, but about values.

BILLY: What's the difference?

VICTOR: I guess that beliefs are about context. If you live at a time when people such as teachers, the church, and so on believe the earth is flat, or that the sun goes around the earth, you believe that until it is proved otherwise.

BILLY: Except for the people who belong to the flat earth society!

VICTOR: Yes. So beliefs change. I would say that values apply universally, all the time, regardless of context.

BILLY: So how does that apply with giving women the vote?

VICTOR: Well, if I have a belief, say, that all people are created equal by God, which is in the Bible, then a value that is consistent with my belief is the value of equality. I would like to think that the value of equality is universal.

BILLY: That sounds lovely in theory, but how does that work in practice?

VICTOR: Some years ago, our Church, which has a value of equality, made a decision that all people, regardless of their gender, could express a call to become ministers. It was consistent with, and flowed from, a belief that God creates, and loves, all people equally.

BILLY: Where previously the belief was ordaining men only?

VICTOR: Exactly

BILLY: But doesn't the Bible teach that women are not to speak in church?

VICTOR: Well ...yes ... at one point.

BILLY: So, according to the Bible, it's wrong to ordain women.

VICTOR: There would be some who might argue that. And whilst I might disagree with them, I respect that they have their fixed beliefs, sincerely and strongly held.

BILLY: But you have a different belief?

VICTOR: As I said, that particular belief needs to be seen in context. When we look closely at Jesus and his teaching, we discover that he teaches values. And one clear value is his teaching about equality.

BILLY: So you go against the biblical teaching at that point?

VICTOR: Interpreting the Bible needs to be guided by the Holy Spirit. If our belief leads to holding equality as a value, then it is appropriate to try to live out equality.

BILLY: It's a slippery slope Vic. Also, in the paper it says that the Uniting Church discussed the issue of euthanasia, or what they call ... voluntary assisted dying.

VICTOR: Yes, that's another 'hot potato'. There was a letter in the Sydney Morning Herald last week from a 91 year old, advocating very coherently for voluntary assisted dying.

BILLY: I saw that, too. The writer was reflecting on how many things had changed during his lifetime.

VICTOR: So what do you believe?

BILLY: I believe it is wrong

VICTOR: Why?

BILLY: Well, I believe that life is sacred, and when we start making decisions to end our lives, it's not our choice.

VICTOR: What about people who are compositis, and in such terrible pain and agony?

BILLY: That's sad to see, but that's life, so to speak. What about you?

VICTOR: I'm still wrestling with that one. I believe, like you, about the sacredness of life. But I also want to live out values such as compassion. I want to be compassionate towards other people, and, from a compassionate perspective, if certain protocols are in place, voluntary assisted dying might become an example of a universal value taking precedence over a contextual belief.

BILLY: That could well pass the pub test; I see what you mean. I remember, years ago, being in the palliative hospital where my great aunt was very ill, and in huge pain. I remember the minister from her church came to visit her, and he – remember the church I attend doesn't have female ministers – spoke to her about illness being 'the cross she had to bear'. Now you mention it, what he said to her was all about beliefs.

VICTOR: I come across many older people who question where God is as they get more frail. In fact, I've come across a few older people who pray that God will take them during the night because they don't have the will to live any more.

BILLY: Really?

VICTOR: Yes. And, years ago, they believed that it was wrong to have doubts.

BILLY: They were taught that having doubts is a sign of a lack of faith?

VICTOR: Exactly.

BILLY: And now?

VICTOR: I guess the value they live by is honesty. If we are wanting to be in a healthy spiritual relationship, then honesty in that relationship is a core value.

BILLY: So it's OK to have doubts and ask questions?

VICTOR: Absolutely.

BILLY: But surely beliefs are more important than values?

VICTOR: I'm not sure about that. There are some 'beliefs' that are non-negotiable for me. What beliefs are non-negotiable for you?

BILLY: Which suggest that there may be some that are negotiable.

VICTOR: Yes, for me, that's right. In the church we occasionally say a creed that says Jesus was born of the virgin Mary.

BILLY: That's an important part of Christian belief.

VICTOR: In the sense that it has been believed and taught, and people believe the virgin birth to be true, although there's no actual proof or evidence.

BILLY: I would suggest that the resurrection of Jesus is in that can't be proven category too. Is that also a negotiable?

VICTOR: For me the difference is that the belief in the virgin birth was developed to fit an Old Testament quote, and that many 'gods on earth' had supernatural births. The resurrection has far more 'evidence', as far as I am concerned. People experienced Jesus in various ways after he had died. That to me is very clear.

BILLY: But surely you can't pick and choose which bits to believe and which bits not to believe? That's like creating your own religion. I can see another slippery slope about all this.

VICTOR: That's a fair point. What I am wanting to say is that I build my life around beliefs, but those beliefs constantly have to be evaluated in their context, with help from the Holy Spirit. And the key

for me is looking very closely at the way Jesus lived, and what he teaches. I would suggest that much of the time Jesus teaches values.

BILLY: But surely he wanted people to believe in God?

VICTOR: Many of His audience did believe in God. But Jesus wanted to show them the heart of God. Many of his audience were living a way they thought that God wanted, by keeping laws, like the 10 commandments. and making sacrifices. That's what they believed. *(Pause)*

BILLY: Where does it say that Jesus was teaching something different?

VICTOR: Well, there's the time when Jesus' disciples were walking through some grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, so they began breaking off some heads of grain and eating them. Jesus was criticised for allowing his disciples to eat on a Sabbath, but Jesus speaks about God wanting compassion not sacrifice.

BILLY: OK. Fair enough.

VICTOR: Billy, tell me about a parable Jesus tells.

BILLY: Ooh, I don't know ... what about the parable of the good Samaritan.

VICTOR: An excellent choice. Do you remember the context?

BILLY: Yes. Jesus has been teaching people to love God and their neighbour.

VICTOR: Core value of Jesus – love. Sorry, I interrupted, carry on.

BILLY: And someone, was it a lawyer, asked “Who is my neighbour?”

VICTOR: And what is an important message in that parable?

BILLY: That we are to show compassion, to help people, and not walk past on the other side.

VICTOR: And in the parable, who was the person who lived that way? Who showed values of love, compassion and generosity?

BILLY: The Samaritan.

VICTOR: Yes, a hated foreigner.

BILLY: Oh I see. You are saying that at the time of Jesus the Jewish people believed that they were God’s chosen people, and Jesus challenges that belief.

VICTOR: Yes. And He teaches about the kingdom of God, which is value-driven. But those values flow from the belief that Jesus is the son of God.

BILLY: The kingdom of God ... ?

VICTOR: That's right. Jesus teaches about forgiveness rather than seeking revenge. Or about loving enemies. These are not beliefs, they are values.

BILLY: I get that. I understand how your beliefs lead to your values.

VICTOR: My understanding of Jesus is that he teaches the values that are to be the ways we behave, and ways we treat other people. Together, our beliefs and values will shape and determine our attitudes and opinions.

BILLY: Still, it does make it hard for your mob when you are on the front page.

VICTOR: I don't see that as a bad thing. It says to the wider community that an important value for many people in the Uniting Church is justice or fairness. And so people in the Uniting Church will not only speak up about perceived injustice, but will actively pursue justice.

BILLY: Is that why some are agitating for action about refugees and asylum seekers?

VICTOR: Precisely. If your understanding of Jesus is that he welcomes all people, that he has compassion for the vulnerable and the marginalised, it is natural, logical even, to be actively pursuing fairness and justice.

BILLY: And what about all this stuff about saying sorry for things that happened years ago in the church?

VICTOR: Again, many people might see reconciliation as a value that Jesus teaches, lives out. And where the church has not lived out being welcoming and inclusive in the past, it is important to seek reconciliation.

BILLY: Inclusive – you’ve mentioned that quite a lot, Vic.

VICTOR: Because it’s an important value to me, and it’s one of the values that my Uniting Church emphasises. Our minister often bangs on about how God loves all people regardless of any differences. And many people struggle with that.

BILLY: Why? What do they believe?

VICTOR: It's hard to say. Some people believe that they are inclusive, but still struggle to accept people of different religions or different ethnic background or different sexual orientation.

BILLY: Doesn't that depress you?

VICTOR: No, the church has been, and always will be, a work in progress. As I said, people's beliefs may change over time. What's important for me are the values that are universal. They are what will bring about more of the kingdom of God on earth.

BILLY: Ah, the kingdom of God on earth again. What would this earth look like if we lived with the values Jesus teaches and lives out? I think I see what you mean. It's about living life with God's values.

VICTOR: And there will be people in the church who are very belief-driven. Diversity seems to have been a core value in the Christian Church for 2000 years.

BILLY: Well, Vic, I really value your friendship, and whilst I don't believe everything you've said is right, and some of what you say sounds very wishy-washy, I do value the way you make me think about my beliefs.

VICTOR: And I believe ... it's your shout.

BILLY: In the interests of friendship and fairness.
Same again?

VICTOR: Of course! Some things never change.

AT THE FOOTY

SCENE: *Fred and Jake are sitting side by side at a football oval, holding beer cans and waiting for the game to start.*

JAKE: Good crowd here for the game.

FRED: I always like the pre-game build up.

JAKE: Look – they’re starting a Mexican wave.

FRED: Well Jake, who do you think is going to win tonight?

JAKE: As you know Fred, I’m barracking for the Spiders. I had a look on their website, and they’re putting out a strong team tonight. They’re bound to eat up the Flies.

FRED: But don’t forget that the Flies beat the Wombats last week – it was 4 goals to 1. I think they’re in good form. Their play down the wings was terrific.

JAKE: I must admit they did surprisingly well. That last goal was pretty amazing.

FRED: Ah, but nothing like the Argentinian Jack Silvero in the World Cup last month. Remember that

goal that clinched the match. He was half-way down the pitch, facing away from the goal, when he kicked it behind him and it went high into the air.

JAKE: Oh, yes I remember. I thought it was going to go right over the net, but it bounced, clipped the underside of the bar, and rolled into the goal. There's no way the goalkeeper could have stopped it.

FRED: Yes, I've never seen anything like it. I call it a blinking miracle.

JAKE: Funny you should say that. I've been thinking about miracles recently. You go to church, Fred. Do you believe in all those miracles in the Bible?

FRED: Which ones did you have in mind?

JAKE: Well, what about the one the Catholics go on about – the one where Mary was a virgin but she gave birth to Jesus. You've got to admit that's pretty unbelievable.

FRED: It's not just Catholics that affirm the Virgin Birth. It's in the Apostles Creed.

JAKE: Whatever. Well, how do you explain it? I mean a virgin birth is biologically impossible.

FRED: I must admit that some of the miracles in the Bible are hard to explain in the light of modern science. Many Christians believe that they're symbolic stories, and are not meant to be literally true. But the Virgin Birth is interesting. I mean there are some species where virgin birth is the normal way of doing business.

JAKE: Go on, you're pulling my leg!

FRED: No, it's true. There are some species of lizards where females give birth without the need for a male lizard. It goes by some fancy name – that sounds like the Parthenon.

JAKE: Just a moment – I'll Google it.

He spends a moment with his smart phone.

JAKE: Yes, you're right. It's called Parthenogenesis.

FRED: So, if it happens all the time with lizards I can't see why it can't sometimes occur spontaneously with humans.

JAKE: But really! Apart from the Mary of Biblical times, have you ever heard of it happening in more modern times?

FRED: I'm not saying it does. But I wouldn't rule it out. I mean all sorts of weird and wonderful things happen in biology, even human biology. You get babies with two heads, and some people can hear colours. We had a sermon about that in our church not so long ago. There was a word for that. Synesthesia. You can learn a lot in church these days!

JAKE: But these are well documented. They might be rare but we have proof that they do happen.

FRED: But just suppose that one in a billion births are virgin births. That would mean one such occurrence every 20 years. Now imagine the poor woman – a virgin mother – trying to explain it. “No, honestly, I haven't been with a man.” “Oh, yes, pull the other leg. Of course you must have been.” No such virgin mother would ever be believed. Imagine the embarrassment that Joseph felt. At least he believed that Mary was telling the truth which is something amazing.

JAKE: If it could be proved that she wasn't a virgin, would that shatter your faith?

FRED: No, I don't see why it would. I mean Jesus has done so much in my life. What difference would it make if I was forced to admit that he was born out of wedlock?

JAKE: Well, wasn't he?

FRED: You know what I mean. If Mary wasn't a virgin it would only make Jesus seem more human in my eyes.

JAKE: You know what I think is odd. The Bible goes to great lengths to trace the ancestry of Jesus back to King David, through Joseph, and then it tells us that Joseph had nothing to do with it biologically.

FRED: Yeh, I never could understand that.

JAKE: Here's the meat pie seller. Do you want me to get you one?

FRED: That'd be great.

JAKE: Two pies, with sauce, please.

FRED: I bet if Jesus was here, the poor pie seller would go out of business.

JAKE: Why is that?

FRED: Well, he'd take five pies and make them go round the entire stadium.

JAKE: And there'd be dozens of bins of food left over. How do you explain the feeding of the five thousand?

FRED: Some people have said that many people had lots of food while many others had nothing. The have's didn't want to share with the have nots. And the generosity of the boy, and the charisma of Jesus, opened up their hearts.

JAKE: But why would Jesus do this? Why should those who were organised enough to bring food have to share with those short-sighted people who brought nothing? I mean the five wise virgins didn't share with the foolish ones!

FRED: Oh, that was just a story to illustrate a point. You can't take it literally.

JAKE: And you don't think that the Feeding of the Five Thousand wasn't just a story to make a point?

FRED: Well the Bible's usually pretty careful in distinguishing between an actual event and a story. Luke refers to the nearest town – Bethsaida I think. When it's just a parable the place is referred to merely as a "certain place". I'm certain that the thing took place but I don't know whether to interpret it literally.

JAKE: I mean how could five loaves and two fish make up so many baskets of scraps, even if the people only ate a crumb of bread like you lot do in communion. It defies the law of conservation of matter.

FRED: Don't forget who created that law! But to me it isn't really that important.

JAKE: Well, why did Jesus perform any miracles at all?

FRED: To help people believe, I guess.

JAKE: But he showed that he preferred it when people believed without needing a miracle to convince them. Tell me Fred, what do you think is the most amazing miracle in the whole Bible?

FRED: Without a doubt it's the one right at the very beginning. The whole Universe was created out of nothing.

JAKE: That's not what science says.

FRED: The big bang theory says that it all started from a tiny point, which is practically the same thing.

JAKE: I suppose.

FRED: And the wonderful diversity of Nature. They used to say that you could prove that God exists by looking at Nature. Then this idea went out of fashion.

JAKE: That's because we found out about Evolution – the way complex things can grow out of simple ones. Natural selection has done it, not God. Or are

you one of those creationists who believe that God waved a little finger and it all came into existence in 4004 BC?

FRED: Oh, no. I believe that it has taken many millions of years and, yes, natural selection has a lot to do with it. But I respect a God who thought of carrying out creation in this remarkable way than if he'd been merely a cosmic magician.

JAKE: Look the players are coming out onto the field.

FRED: Yes, just a couple more minutes to kick-off.

JAKE: I hope the Spiders start well today. Last week they were awful in the first half, and I thought they were going to get killed. Going behind so early, the fact that they won made it feel like they'd snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, it was like they'd come back from the dead.

FRED: Good analogy, Jake. You make it sound like Jesus and his death and resurrection.

JAKE: Well what about the Resurrection? I suppose you're going to tell me that it is quite normal for dead people to come alive again. Is it like the Virgin Birth perhaps? Dead people do come alive but it's a very rare event and nobody would believe it. Or was He just in some catatonic trance and only *seemed* to

be dead? I suppose you're going to tell me that it's not important to your faith whether it was true or false.

FRED: No, the Resurrection is central to my faith but I'm not sure how it was done. It's a deep mystery. But I do know that Jesus is alive through my experience of Him.

JAKE: But it's quite unscientific.

FRED: I don't have a clear answer. There's something about the risen Christ. He went to a lot of trouble to show He wasn't just an apparition. But His risen body was different. He could appear in locked rooms. He ate a fish. I wonder if there's a reality that's neither ghostly nor material as we know it. And remember that He told Mary not to touch Him because He hadn't yet risen. In fact I don't think anybody touched Him.

JAKE: Thomas did.

FRED: No, he said he wouldn't believe unless he put his hands into Jesus' side. But when he was with the other disciples a week later he said he didn't have to touch Jesus in order to believe it was really Him.

JAKE: Maybe the one who was there wasn't Thomas. It could have been his twin brother.

Remember Thomas was a identical twin. That's why they called him Didymus – it means twin.

FRED: Then what did they call his twin brother?

JAKE: Perhaps it was Jeremiah, and they called the twins Tom and Jerry. They might have played cat and mouse growing up.

JAKE: Quiet! The whistle is about to go. Come on you Spiders!

ON EASTWOOD STATION

SCENE: *A railway station.*

CARL: Oh hi, Neil. Haven't seen you for a while.

NEIL: No, but it's good to see you. I'm waiting for the all stations – what about you?

CARL: Same. I'm going into Town Hall. *(Pause)* What's that you're reading?

NEIL: Oh, it's just the Bible. I'm using this time to catch up on my Bible study.

CARL: Wow. Bibles these days don't look like Bibles used to. It's got a fancy cover. I thought it might have been one of Dan Brown's latest novels. You know we Christians are lucky to have the Bible.

NEIL: Why lucky?

CARL: Well, it takes the uncertainty out of our faith. You know what's true and what's false and how to live as a Christian just by reading God's word.

NEIL: But it's not always easy to interpret.

CARL: Oh, no. You don't have to interpret it. It's God's inspired word. You just take it at face value.

NEIL: You mean read it literally?

CARL: Of course. *(Pause)*

NEIL: So you believe that the world was created in just 144 hours?

CARL: You mean the six days of creation? Well, maybe that's not supposed to be literal days. A day is as a thousand years ... or a thousand million years. It's a God day, that's what I mean.

NEIL: So there you are. It says 'six days' but you are interpreting it as six ages.

CARL: I suppose so, but you have to be very careful in interpreting things. After all, if you allow too much interpretation you can make the Bible say anything you like. *(Pause)*

NEIL: What about miracles?

CARL: What about them? Biblical miracles or State Rail managing to get the trains on time?

NEIL: I mean things in the Bible. Take something from the Old Testament for example. Do you really believe that the sun stood still in Joshua's time?

CARL: Why not?

NEIL: Because it's a physical impossibility. The sun's apparent movement is caused by the earth's rotation and that would mean that the earth would have had to stop rotating. Joshua and his army would have been thrown into a heap by the shock. And imagine the energy that would be required to set it going again!

CARL: But God made the physical laws. Couldn't God modify them in some way in order for this to happen? All things are possible for God. The Bible says so.

NEIL: It's not so much *could* God but rather *would* God. (*Pause*) What about the virgin birth? Do you take that literally?

CARL: Well the Bible makes it clear that Mary was a virgin. Don't you just accept that?

NEIL: The English version of the Bible has virgin but the word that is used in Greek can mean a young woman or a virgin. The Greek is something of a mistranslation from the Hebrew. If *you* believe that she was literally a virgin that's fine. But it's

biologically impossible. The Bible probably means that she had never slept with anyone other than Joseph. She was betrothed to Joseph. In those days that meant more than just engagement. They were virtually married.

CARL: That's the trouble with you and your modern interpretation. Why can't you accept what God has written in black and white. You always come up with theories about the meaning of words, and what's written in Hebrew or Greek or Latin. In any case, what's so biologically impossible about a virgin birth? There are species where this happens all the time.

NEIL: Look, the Bible is a wonderful resource for us Christians, which is why I read it every day. But we have to be very careful about how we read it. All I'm saying is that you can't read it all literally. You have to remember that, for a start, we don't have the original manuscripts. Secondly the biblical manuscripts were never intended to be a guide for Christians two thousand years later. Many were written to specific people in a particular time and addressing a particular situation. You have to understand the social context of the times in which the writers lived. I presume you don't believe that God dictated it word for word.

CARL: Well, yes, I think God did dictate it, through the Holy Spirit. I acknowledge that there are minor

errors, here and there, in terms of detail. But you're making out that you have to be an expert to interpret it. Next thing you'll be telling me that ordinary Christians shouldn't read it and that only the priests should interpret it, like in the Middle Ages.

NEIL: No, don't be silly. Why do you think I set aside some time each day to read it? But I'm open to learning about the context and learning from modern scholarship and keeping an open mind. As well as the Bible I read books about what it means, and go to Bible studies.

CARL: But the message of the Bible is so clear. Love God and love one another ... and love your enemies.

NEIL: There I'd agree with you. The important messages in the Bible come through loud and clear. But you know why they speak to you so loudly? The Holy Spirit operating in your life makes these teachings resonate with your personal experience of God. Personal experience is as valid as the Bible in knowing God. (*Pause*)

CARL: Do you believe *anything at all* in the Bible? What about the resurrection? Is this just a metaphor or did it really happen? And what about life after death?

NEIL: Well, I've often thought that the Kingdom of God refers to *this* life. But I suppose there is life beyond the grave. At least I hope so, but I really don't know what it looks like.

CARL: What do you mean you suppose. Doesn't the Bible clearly tell us so? Or are you trying to tell me that it's meant figuratively or that in Biblical times, life after death meant something else.

NEIL: Is this our train?

CARL: No it's the Central Coast train – ours is due to come soon afterwards – if you can believe the electronic board. So when it comes to the Bible telling us how to live our life, do you mean that we can't take it literally?

NEIL: That depends.

CARL: Depends?! So even here you quibble. How's an ordinary Christian supposed to know what to believe and how to live? I suppose you don't accept Paul's injunction that women should be silent in church. I know that in the Uniting Church we've some very good women ministers. But I've always been a bit uneasy about going against what the Bible says. Somehow it doesn't seem right.

NEIL: You have to remember that we're more enlightened these days about a woman's role in

society. Back then there was no equality of the sexes. And besides, Paul was writing to a specific church where they were having trouble with the women.

CARL: I know a few churches like that. Anyway, I just want to be able to use the Bible as a set of rules, and live accordingly.

NEIL: So you follow the commandments in the Bible?

CARL: Of course.

NEIL: Which ones? Exodus 20 or Exodus 34?

CARL: What do you mean?

NEIL: There's two lots of 10 commandments – and they have similarities and differences.

CARL: Don't be difficult.

NEIL: Sorry. I was only trying to point out the difficulties of saying "I keep the 10 commandments" when you may not know which ones you are keeping, or not keeping. (*Pause*) So when was the last time you washed anyone's feet? When Jesus washed his disciples' feet he exhorted them to do likewise.

CARL: But that's different. Well I suppose I can see what you mean. But it makes living as a Christian so difficult.

NEIL: Does your wife wear a hat to church?

CARL: Well, no. Women haven't done that for years.

NEIL: Yet Paul said that women shouldn't have their heads uncovered in church.

CARL: Well, times have changes a bit. I think it's a woman's choice. Anyway, what about the Bible's attitude towards same-sex marriage?

NEIL: You've touched on a delicate matter there. I don't think any of the writers envisaged the possibility of same-sex marriage. There are many issues that arise that the Bible doesn't address.

CARL: Like what?

NEIL: Stem cell research, safe injecting rooms ...

CARL: But surely same-sex marriage is wrong. The Bible says so. Well, it doesn't say so precisely but it says that homosexuality is wrong, so there.

NEIL: I'm not so sure. I've struggled with same-sex relationships. When I recalibrate my thinking to the

principle of love for my neighbour I can't reconcile that with objecting to two people having a happy and committed life together even though they're both men or both women. I know of many such relationships that are loving, exclusive, committed and permanent.

CARL: But the Bible describes it as an abomination.

NEIL: A minister once explained to me that in Biblical times homosexuality was synonymous with orgies and sex without commitment. The modern phenomenon of two guys living in a permanent relation, with mutual love and commitment, was totally unknown then.

CARL: So you do believe in same-sex marriage?

NEIL: It's not a matter of believing in it. It seems to be consistent with the principle of love. I'm more open to the possibility than I once was.

CARL: But it goes against the definition of the word 'marriage'. You can't change the meaning of a word just because it suits you.

NEIL: Don't forget that words change their meaning all the time. A 'gentleman' once meant 'a man of noble birth'. Now it just means 'a well-mannered male'. And in public toilets it just means 'male'. You don't have to be high-born, or even well-mannered to

use the ‘john’. My parents used to have a ‘gay’ time, and a website was something you swept away.

CARL: Yes, but ...

NEIL: We both know Nancy and her daughter Charlotte. Now the definition of ‘daughter’ usually means that the mother has given birth to her. And yet young Charlotte was born by surrogacy. So should we call her ‘surrogate daughter’? But that would be unkind, because she and Jim love her just as much as if Nancy *had* been able to give birth. No, the meaning of the word ‘daughter’ has come to mean any girl who has the same relationship to a parent as if she had come out of her mother’s womb.

CARL: What about the Uniting Church accepting openly gay people into the ministry? What do you say to that?

NEIL: You hit the nail on the head earlier. In the Bible it says that all things are possible for God, and that’s why you are prepared to believe a miracle that goes against all known scientific knowledge.

CARL: Yes.

NEIL: So, if we agree that all things are possible, then it seems to me that it is wrong of us to say “God wouldn’t do something or other”. It seems

inappropriate for humans to put boundaries around God.

CARL: I suppose so. That would be us telling God what God can and cannot do.

NEIL: Precisely. So what if God calls a person into ministry, regardless of gender? The process of the church discerning whether or not a person has the gifts for ministry still applies. The church still determines whether or not there is a genuine sense of call. The same principle applies regarding sexual orientation. Ultimately what is important is whether the church – you and I – discern a sense of God’s call on a person. There’s always new situations to consider.

CARL: That’s true. The Church leaders in the past used to speak about “The Lord has yet more light and truth ...”.

NEIL: Indeed – a bit like being in a dark tunnel, and coming out into light. Think about how previous generations had to face changing situations.

CARL: What, like Galileo saying that the earth revolved around the sun rather than the other way around?

NEIL: Yes – and how many church leaders tried to maintain slavery rather than abolish it.

CARL: My parents are teetotalers. They had to sign a pledge or something. Now we even have real wine for communion.

NEIL: Not at the church I go to; I think your parents must have been former Methodists.

CARL: Maybe they'll change one day.

NEIL: So one of the issues for us today is same-sex marriage. I think the Uniting Church tackled the question about sexuality a while back, but you can't expect everyone to agree. We have to balance the principle that God loves all people – even you and me – that's the principle of love – with the principle that we shouldn't be a stumbling block – that's also follows from the principle of love.

CARL: Paul says that we should refrain from eating pork if it would be a stumbling block to our brother – and sister – even though there's nothing wrong with it. But I'm not sure about all this sexuality stuff. It's all so difficult, and I'm still trying to work through that question. I realise that it could lead to taking verses out of context, but I'm concerned that we end up with 'anything goes'.

NEIL: Agreed. There are many issues that we need to think through and pray about, and we may find our views change as we go along. I think that's a good thing but it can be very difficult for some people. I'm

glad to be part of the Uniting Church because it's a church that doesn't shy away from the tough issues, even though people may have very different views. It's good that we are able to include those who bring us a literal interpretation, and those who help us appreciate the context.

CARL: But here comes our train. It's been great talking to you. I can see that although your views are more liberal than mine, we're fellow Christians and I can learn a lot from you.

NEIL: Well I'm glad we had this conversation because it has reminded me that we should try not to get *too* carried away with interpretations. But I guess it's the Holy Spirit that guides us how to interpret God's word.

CARL: Anyway, for the rest of the trip, let's talk about how Roger Federer seems to be doing so much better this year after his couple of years in the wilderness. How do you think he's done it?

NEIL: Probably he spent a lot of time like us today?

CARL: What? Talking about the Bible?

NEIL: No. Training.

THE TRAIN OF LIFE

SCENE: *A railway carriage. Nicholas is seated and all the other seats are empty. Chris comes along the corridor from the right carrying two paper coffee cups and sits down opposite Nicholas.*

CHRIS: It was so busy down in the buffet car. I had to wait ages for the coffee. Here you are.

NICHOLAS: Thanks very much

CHRIS: Oh, where's Lisa gone?

NICHOLAS: Lisa? She got off at the last station.

CHRIS: I didn't realise she was getting off so soon.

NICHOLAS: Nor did she. The train stopped and she suddenly realised it was *her* stop.

CHRIS: *(after a pause)* It's a bit like death isn't?

NICHOLAS: What is? You mean nearly missing your station is like dying?

CHRIS: No. But here we are on a train. I mean that's like life. And we all get off at different stations. That's like dying. From our point of view it's just like Lisa has just died and we're here mourning her loss. She's no longer with us.

NICHOLAS: That's an interesting train of thought. Let me think about that for a moment. But from Lisa's point of view she's still alive, although in a different place.

CHRIS: I say, do you believe there's life after death? After we die do we just get off the train we call life and have a new sort of life?

NICHOLAS: Yes, I believe there's life after death. (*pause*) You're supposed to be a Christian. In fact, I recall you saying you are training to become a lay preacher. Don't *you* believe in eternal life?

CHRIS: Well I suppose I do, but I can't stop thinking that when my brain stops functioning there's no mechanism for me to have consciousness. And if I don't have consciousness I'm as good as being dead even if my heart is still beating. The brain holds all my memories and in a way when all my memories have gone I'm no longer me.

NICHOLAS: Well, how do you back up your computer?

CHRIS: Why have you changed the subject? Can't you stay on track? I suppose all this talk about death is getting you down. But if you really want to know I use iCloud. All my files are stored somewhere out there in cyberspace.

NICHOLAS: So if your computer gives up the ghost then I suppose all your files are lost.

CHRIS: No, of course not. I just buy a new one and I can then download all my files.

NICHOLAS: So, your computer has life after death. You buy a new computer – a new body – but its memory lives on. You see you're assuming that what you call 'you' is contained in that lump of tissue inside your head that you call your brain. But what if your brain is just that part of you that interacts with the material world and the real *you* exists in some sort of celestial cyberspace?

CHRIS: Oh, I suppose you can think of it like that. It's hard to imagine what life after death will be like. One thing I know for sure is that we'll be reunited with our loved ones. At least that's what people always say at funerals.

NICHOLAS: Yes. That's right. I went to a funeral in the country last week; the cemetery was in the dead centre of town, and the minister spoke in those terms. But it's interesting that the Bible doesn't

actually say anything about being reunited with loved ones.

CHRIS: But some people who've had near death experiences have reported going down a long corridor towards the light and seeing their mother at the end beckoning them on.

NICHOLAS: Well, what about people who've had step parents or who've been adopted? Which mother might be there to beckon them?

CHRIS: Good point. I suppose that it's even more difficult with wives. Someone who has been married three times would have three wives holding out their arms to their newly dead husband. Even if he loved those wives who died before him, and only remarried because he was a widower, it could be very embarrassing. Imagine having to introduce wife number two to wife number one. When you remarry you might still love your first wife but you have to move on.

NICHOLAS: Or a mother who had two children, one of whom died very young, but the other outlived the elderly mother. They would each have their mother, but how would the two children recognise her.

CHRIS So there is probably a huge number of pastoral situations that make this all very tricky.

NICHOLAS: But here there's some very clear biblical teaching. The Sadducees (remember they didn't believe in resurrection) they tried to trip Jesus up by making up a hypothetical case of a woman who had seven husbands, one after the other. What they did in those times was that if a husband died without children his brother was obliged to marry the widow. In this story this happened seven times. One bride for seven brothers! Well, in heaven who was she married to?

CHRIS: Heaven only knows. How did Jesus get out of that one?

NICHOLAS: He simply declared that in heaven there's no such thing as being married. Don't forget that the marriage vow is only until 'death do us part'.

CHRIS: So I guess we'll all be single in heaven, just like the angels. Perhaps we won't even have sex ... I mean gender ... up in Heaven. There won't be a distinction between male and female.

NICHOLAS: That's dead interesting. I guess the resurrected life will be so different to life as we know it that many of the things we take for granted here just won't be relevant anymore.

CHRIS: I suppose that's because we won't have bodies in Heaven. We'll be disembodied spirits.

NICHOLAS: But that's another thing that the Bible seems quite definite about. The resurrection of the faithful is a resurrection of the body. After his resurrection Jesus was no ghost.

CHRIS: And yet there *was* something very different about his resurrected body. When Mary saw him in the garden she didn't recognise him at first. And he told her not to touch him because he hadn't yet ascended into Heaven. Then on the road to Emmaus the disciples didn't recognise him even though he walked with them and talked with them for some time. It was only when he broke bread with them that they knew who he was. And what about the time when the disciples were in a locked room and he suddenly appeared amongst them? Doesn't this sound more like a ghost or an apparition?

NICHOLAS: But isn't Thomas supposed to have put his fingers into the wounds of Jesus.

CHRIS: Did he? He did say he wouldn't believe that Jesus had risen unless he put his fingers into the holes where the nails had gone and his fist into the hole in his side. But did he actually do it? When Jesus suddenly materialised in that locked room, Thomas was there with the disciples. Jesus invited him to put his fingers and hand into the wounds but what did Thomas do? He just knelt down and declared "My Lord and my God". The Bible seems

to suggest that Thomas no longer needed to touch Jesus in order to believe.

NICHOLAS: Maybe not, but Jesus made it quite clear that he was no ghost. In the locked room episode he actually said, “Look at my hands and feet – it is really I myself. Feel me and see. Ghosts have no flesh or bones as you can see that I have.” And to make it even clearer that he wasn’t just an apparition he asked, “I say, what’s for breakfast?” The disciples gave him some broiled fish which he ate. Now have you ever heard of a ghost asking for food, and actually eating it? No, his Resurrection was a resurrection of the body and this is what he promises us, I’m sure.

CHRIS: But which body? If it’s the body as it is at the moment of resurrection that would have been OK for Jesus because he’d only been dead for three days. But if I’m buried and don’t get resurrected for another thousand years I hate to think what I’d look like! And then, what if I’m cremated?

NICHOLAS: I know a few people who are dead against being cremated. I’m sure that’s why some branches of the Christian Church are against cremation. They want their body to be whole, ready for its resurrection. But I think that after a thousand years there wouldn’t be a whole lot of difference between a body that had been cremated and one that had been buried. No, perhaps the resurrected body is

the body at the moment of death. This seems to be what happened with Jesus.

CHRIS: Yes, but if I am blown up then the moment of death would be a split second after my body was ripped apart. So if what you say is true my resurrected body would be in a thousand pieces. And if I die at the age of 100 I wouldn't like to be resurrected as a feeble old man. And what about babies who die in the womb? It wouldn't be much fun to be a foetus in Heaven!

NICHOLAS: I suppose you're right. And what about people who've died and had their ashes scattered somewhere, such as into the ocean? I guess a resurrected body is a different sort of body, living mostly in a different universe where time and space might work quite differently.

CHRIS: OK, but would we remember our earthly lives when we reach Heaven?

NICHOLAS: You seem to be assuming that Heaven is the only after-life destination.

CHRIS: True, but I don't want to get bogged down in debating whether Hell is an actual place or whether it's the state of being alienated from God.

NICHOLAS: Remember the Biblical story about the rich man in Hell. He begged Abraham to send

Lazarus down from Heaven with some water to put on his tongue. He remembered that this leper Lazarus used to beg at his gates. When Abraham said no, he asked Abraham to warn his brothers and to stop them joining him in that fiery Hell. So the rich man *could* remember his earthly life. I would assume that the same would be true in Heaven.

CHRIS: I agree with you. It would be a sort of cheat if I couldn't remember my earthly life when I get to Heaven. In what sense would it be *me* who was enjoying eternal life? I mean with a new body and a new mind I wouldn't really be me.

NICHOLAS: I suppose not. It'd be like a farmer who claims to have had the same axe for fifty years. But in that time the axe had had five new handles and three new heads!

CHRIS: I suppose if we don't remember our earthly life this would make things easier for that woman who'd had seven successive husbands. None of them would be able to remember that they'd ever been married to her and so there'd be no problem. But I agree with you. The Bible does seem to make it clear that memory doesn't get reformatted after resurrection. Jesus certainly hadn't forgotten Mary Magdalene.

NICHOLAS: Yes it *is* important to know that memory lives on after death. Imagine a widow who

eventually follows her dearly departed husband only to find that he doesn't know who she is.

CHRIS: That's tragic enough in *this* life when a wife has Alzheimer's and doesn't recognise her husband. I presume that the memory that survives death is not as it was at the time of death.

NICHOLAS: No, I believe it is similar to what happens when the hard disk on our computer gets corrupted. We get a new computer and download the uncorrupted files from the Cloud. We all want to believe that we remember our loved ones after death.

CHRIS: But perhaps that's just wishful thinking on our part.

NICHOLAS: Maybe, although Jesus certainly remembered his disciples after the Resurrection. There's no doubt about us remembering our earthly life.

CHRIS: But if we'd led a tragic life or had a tragic death, or we had suffered abuse – we might not *want* to remember.

NICHOLAS: Perhaps from the perspective of Heaven we would see earthly tragedies in a different light. I remember being distraught one day when I was six. I had to stand up in front of my class to recite a poem. My mind froze and I completely

forgot the words. At the time it was a tragedy of immense proportions. Today I just laugh about it. I know it's hard to imagine that one could reach a state where the really tragic events in this life could be seen as little blips with no real significance. But the thing is that we have no conception of what the resurrected life could be like.

CHRIS: Well, do you think we'll still have free will in Heaven?

NICHOLAS: I'm glad to see that you've brought that skeleton out of the cupboard, and that you agree that we do enjoy free will in *this* life, and that we aren't just machines.

CHRIS: Well, if we're simply pre-ordained biological machines then what we've been doing this morning is just so much pre-determined babble. It would have no significance as a discussion. There would no longer be such a thing as truth. No, despite what some people say we *do* have free will. That's why we can be held accountable for our actions. But what about after death? Will we still have the ability to choose?

NICHOLAS: Why not? If we have free will here, why not somewhere where it's all so much better?

CHRIS: Then in Heaven I could choose to reject God and sin could therefore exist in Heaven.

NICHOLAS: Remember that's already been done! There is at least one case of a rebellion in Heaven mentioned in the Bible. Isn't that why Satan was cast out of Heaven?

CHRIS: One thing for sure is that when I die I'll be able to catch up on a lot of sleep.

NICHOLAS: Yes, I've often wondered why there's always so much emphasis on resting in peace after death. I guess if I die after a long and difficult illness, resting in peace might be OK. But if I drop dead on the golf course then resting for eternity doesn't seem much to look forward to.

CHRIS: The peace bit would be OK. It's just the rest bit. Resting should be a pause between two lots of activity. But then Jesus didn't say that eternal life just means sleeping. He certainly didn't rest after the resurrection. He spoke to people, went for walks and went to breakfast parties. I think that somehow the resting bit has crept in as part of the mythology of death.

NICHOLAS: Perhaps those who sculpted the effigies for crypts found it easier to make reclining figures at sleep rather than figures engaging in some interesting activity.

CHRIS: But isn't there something in the Bible about the dead sleeping until we shall all be raised together

at the Second Coming? That suggests that sleeping in death is only a temporary state and not how it will be forever.

NICHOLAS: I've often wondered whether, before I was born, I asked myself what life after birth might be like. But I can't remember back that far.

CHRIS: Perhaps, before they're born, twins somehow communicate with one another and ask the same sort of questions about life as we're asking about death. What will life outside the womb be like? Will it be as good as life in the uterus? I strongly believe that the quality of life after death exceeds earthly life as much as earthly life exceeds life in the womb.

NICHOLAS: I don't suppose the caterpillar can comprehend what it will be like being a butterfly. So although it's perfectly natural to wonder about such things we shouldn't be too concerned that we don't have much in the way of answers. At least we're one up on the caterpillars because we have Jesus. In a way he's like a butterfly who became a caterpillar in order to help us to become butterflies.

CHRIS: You know we seem to know very little about life after death. As Christians we know that it exists, that we'll be in some sort of environment where we have bodies, that we'll see God and indeed be close to God, that it will be far more wonderful

than our earthly life. We know that we'll remember our earthly life and we'll be with our loved ones and will continue to love them – but our relationships will somehow be on a different footing.

NICHOLAS: Yes, on earth we seem to only be able to love some by excluding others. We choose a partner to the exclusion of all others. If we have children we love our children in a different way to the way we love our neighbour's children. But I believe that in Heaven there will be no such limitations. As we become like God we'll love everyone as God loves everyone.

CHRIS: Whoops, I've just realised. This is my station. I have to get off here. Thanks for sharing your thoughts.

NICHOLAS: No worries.

CHRIS: I'll see you next time.

NICHOLAS: If not in this life then perhaps in the other.

IN GRANDPA'S NURSING HOME

SCENE: *The scene is the garden of a nursing home.*

JOE: Hi Gramps. How are you feeling today?

GRAMPS: Oh, not so bad. If I make it to next week I'll be 86.

JOE: Wow that's old! Can you remember when you were only six?

GRAMPS: Of course I can. I can remember getting the Christopher Robin book *Now We Are Six* for Christmas when I was only five and a half and I felt guilty reading it because I wasn't yet six. And now I'm almost 86 but the days of my childhood seem like yesterday. In fact the older I get the more recent my younger days seem to be.

JOE: It must be awful to be old. I hope I never become old.

GRAMPS: If you keep driving the way you do I think you'll get your wish.

JOE: I didn't mean that. I'd like to live to 100 but stay 20 the whole time.

GRAMPS: Wouldn't we all!

JOE: I wonder why God made us so that we grow old. Why couldn't he have arranged for us to stay at a certain age, say 40, until he decides it's time for us to go?

GRAMPS: He must have his reasons. St Paul grumbled that when he was young he was carried about where he didn't want to go and when he was old ...

JOE: ... he was carried about where he didn't want to go. Yes life's like that – going around in a great big circle. When you're a baby you're dependent on others and when you're old the same is true. A toddler learning to walk has a walker and an old person has a walking frame. There's not that much difference between them.

GRAMPS: Well I haven't quite got to the stage of a walking frame yet, but my stick *does* come in handy to steady me. But you're right. Old age is rather like being a baby in many ways. A baby has no teeth and has to eat baby food and an old person often has to eat mashed food in the end.

JOE: So if we end up back to the same helpless state in which we came into the world, what's the purpose of life? I mean what does it achieve?

GRAMPS: Now Joe, going around in circles can be misleading – you might in fact be getting to a different level. Remember when you were with grandma in that multi-level parking station? She said you were wasting your time going round and round in circles because it was clear there were no parking spots. She didn't twig to the fact that you were getting higher and higher! There's quite a difference between being young and being old – apart from the obvious ones.

JOE: The only difference I can see is that when you're young you've got your whole life ahead of you. When you're old it's all behind you.

GRAMPS: Ah but there's an even more important difference. A new born baby is just a bundle of selfish desires.

JOE: Gramps, how can you say that? Babies are like angels, coming straight from heaven. Don't tell me you believe in that 'original sin' nonsense?

GRAMPS: The theologians of old were grasping after a truth but they have a lot to answer for calling it 'original sin'. However, when you think about it, babies are intrinsically selfish. Their whole world

revolves around themselves. Of course God creates them that way. It's part of his plan.

JOE: And what do you think is that plan?

GRAMPS: Everyone is born with free will and desires and the purpose of life is learning to control them – in learning that there are other people in the world besides ourselves, with their own desires. The purpose of life is to learn to love – to loves God and to love others.

JOE: But surely a newborn baby loves its mother.

GRAMPS: True, but you must admit it's a very selfish form of love – it's a love that's motivated by need. And when you meet you life's partner the love you feel for her is largely motivated by what she can do for you.

JOE: Grandpa, I never thought of you as a cynic! You make young romantic love sound sordid.

GRAMPS: Sorry if it comes across that way. I'm just being brutally honest. There's nothing wrong with sex appeal and romantic love. God is happy for us to fall in love, even if it's largely a selfish love in the beginning.

JOE: So was that how it was with you and Grandma?

GRAMPS: Of course. When I first met your grandma I was conscious of how good looking she was, what a great dancer she was and how well she could cook. And oh boy, how she made me laugh! In other words I was fixated on what she could do for *me*. But that's how young love is supposed to be in the beginning. Then, if you have a good marriage, over the years it develops into a deeper sort of love – a sort of merging together. That's how it is with God. God desires that we exercise our free will in choosing to become one with him.

JOE: But isn't there a danger in losing our individuality if we merge our souls into God? Surely individuality is a good thing. Doesn't God want us to be ambitious?

GRAMPS: When you're young, like you my boy, individuality and ambition are good things. God wants us to be ambitious because it exercises the talents that he has given us. But if we're not careful, being ambitious can make us very selfish. We might walk all over other people in an effort to be rich or famous – to be better than others. However, as we get older, God wants us to learn to be happy when other people succeed, rather than being jealous of others' success. In that way we become less of an individual in a funny sort of way.

JOE: Gee, this is getting a bit too deep for me. So, tell me Gramps, what it's like getting old? I'd really

like to know because, despite my driving, I hope I'll be 86 one day. In a way I think of you as a trail blazer. You're the forward scout, helping me to prepare for what's ahead.

GRAMPS: That's a nice way of putting it.

JOE: Well what's the worst part of getting old?

GRAMPS: Well, when I retired I had a hard time adjusting. One day I was in charge of a large company and the next day I was a nobody. Whenever I went back I found that the company was managing perfectly well without me. I just felt useless. I wasn't the only one. When I was 66 people my age were always going on about how busy they had been since they retired. "I don't know how I ever found time to go to work," they would say. It seemed to me that some of them were just trying to justify their continued existence by bragging about all the things they were doing.

JOE: Almost as if they stopped being frantically busy they'd be ready for the scrapheap.

GRAMPS: Exactly. God doesn't love us because of the number of things we do. Nor, I'm happy to say, does our family. They value us for what we *are* not what we *do*. Of course being retired gave me time to do things your Gran and I had always wanted to, like seeing the world. And I started volunteering for

Community Aid. But I also enjoyed times when I just sat and thought about life and I tried not to feel guilty about my ‘grandpa sleeps’ in the afternoon.

JOE: And what about now? Do you find life satisfying?

GRAMPS: Funnily enough I do. Oh, I don’t do as much as I used to but I’ve learnt not to feel guilty about that. The trouble with this place is that they’re always wanting you to *do* things. “Come on Mr Fosco, come and play Bingo.” “I’m sure you’d like to join in on the community singing in the lounge – all those old songs that you remember.” They mean well, but personally I can’t think of anything worse than Bingo or Community Singing.

JOE: So what do you do all day?

GRAMPS: I used to do a lot of community work, such as driving old ladies to their doctor’s appointments. But now I no longer drive I’ve had to give that up. I read a lot, and listen to my CDs. I go for walks and feed the birds. And I’m not entirely anti-social. I enjoy the bus outings they organise. And I read my Bible every day and go to a Bible Study every week. You’d think at my age I’d know everything about the Bible, but while the words remain familiar the meaning seems to change. I suppose my life must seem boring to you.

JOE: Does it seem boring to you?

GRAMPS: Not at all. Perhaps that's because I've slowed down and adjusted to a quieter life-style. And remember that someone of my age has many more memories than you have.

JOE: But Gramps. You shouldn't live in the past!

GRAMPS: Why not ... at least some of the time? For you it might seem that the past no longer exists, but not for me. Your Grandmother still exists for me even though she died ten years ago. In God's eyes our lives are like a book. We have to walk through it without stopping but God can read whatever part he wants. For example yesterday I was remembering when I took my Harley Davidson from Sydney to Darwin. I was about your age.

JOE: Wow, I never knew that. I guess I've always thought of you as always being old. But of course, you were my age once. I guess I forget when I walk around this place, that all those old people I see probably had very interesting lives when they were younger.

GRAMPS: Take my word for it, they do. I've had some very interesting talks with a lot of them. Look at that old man over there. That's Simon Johnson, if that's his real name. He was once a spy working for MI5. Jean Simmons over there used to be the leading

dancer at the Tivoli. She once showed me photos of when she was young. She looked like a million dollars. Colin, sitting on that bench over there was once the moderator of the Uniting Church. And that lady who's talking to him, is Susan Smith. She has a bronze medal from the Melbourne Olympics.

JOE: But that's all in the past. Doesn't it depress you that you no longer contribute to society?

GRAMPS: Tell me Joe, What sort of work are you in? You told me but I forget. Something to do with computers?

JOE: I do the web pages for a chain of bottle shops.

GRAMPS: I suppose you think that long after you're dead, people will remember you as the great web designer for the Cork and Screw chain of bottle shops. Face it. Once you retire someone else will take over from you and they'll design completely different web pages. Your work will be totally in the past and, if that past no longer exists, your work will have been for nothing. Does that depress you?

JOE: I suppose it does. But we all want to leave a legacy when we die. It's awful to think that what we spend the best years of our lives doing, in the end counts for nothing. Maybe I won't be remembered for my web design, but don't forget that my band has made a few recordings.

GRAMPS: That's great, but how many people will be listening to them in fifty years time?

JOE: Gramps, are you trying to depress me? I thought you were proud of me and the band.

GRAMPS: Sorry Joe. No, of course I am. I'm just trying to point out that wanting to be remembered after we die is no substitute for eternal life. Everyone in the world has heard of Donald Trump but how many will remember him in a hundred years time? Why, in a thousand years even Shakespeare or Einstein might be unknown to the average person.

JOE: So, doesn't it depress you that in the long run your life will have been for nothing?

GRAMPS: Well my 9 to 5 work has already been forgotten. When I die I will live on in the memories of my friends and family. That might give me another eighty years or so of that sort of immortality. But in two hundred years time I'll be lucky to be more than an entry in someone's family tree – just a name and a couple of dates.

JOE: I get it. Immortality is not for the individual but it's the genes that go on and on. No wonder some men are obsessed with sowing their seeds widely.

GRAMPS: A bit tough for those who have no children. No, eternal life has nothing to do with perpetuating one's genes.

JOE: You mean it's about living forever in heaven.

GRAMPS: That's part of it. But another part of the miracle of eternal life is the fact that the past always exists. It's part of the eternal story. But what's more important is that one becomes part of the eternal God. Wanting to be remembered after we die, or wanting to live forever as an individual, is basically selfish. I don't claim to understand eternity, but I believe that our individuality will become less important in heaven as we become one with God.

JOE: Phew, that's all too difficult for me to understand.

GRAMPS: Me too.

JOE: Well, getting back to the here and now, what should I be doing to prepare for getting old?

GRAMPS: Hmm, that's a difficult question. I suppose that to get through the shock of retirement it's important to develop interests outside of your job. You've got your rock band, so that might keep you going for some time after you retire. Developing relationships is important too – becoming part of a community, like a church. And having patience is

crucial. As his body slows down the impatient man becomes bitter and depressed. Accepting one's limitations as one becomes more and more frail is essential. But old age isn't such a gloomy time as you might think.

JOE: Doesn't the prospect of death depress you?

GRAMPS: One thing about getting old is that death doesn't seem the ogre that it appears to be when you're young. I don't say that I'm actively looking forward to death – that may come. But I'm content that I've had a good life so when it does come I won't fight it.

JOE: But isn't it good to not give up and to fight old age?

GRAMPS: I don't say I've given up. According to life expectancy tables I've still got, on average, another 6 years. And if I do make it to 92, on average I've got another 2 or 3 years. At that rate I could live forever, like Zeno's tortoise.

JOE: Zeno who?

GRAMPS: There you go. He was a famous Greek philosopher who lived 2500 years ago and most people these days have never heard of him. But I may not have enough life expectancy left to explain his paradox to you. What I was trying to say is that

accepting the fact that one is old is not the same as giving up. Some people go to great lengths to pretend that they're still young. I mean, take your Auntie Helen. She's in her 60s and she still wears mini skirts and stilettos. I've lost track of the number of face-lifts she's had – probably fewer than the number of husbands. No, accepting old age is quite different to giving up.

JOE: Well I suppose you're looking forward to being united with Grandma.

GRAMPS: I would like to. But remember that I won't be married to her. There's something that Jesus said about there being no such thing as marriage in heaven.

JOE: Well can't you propose to her all over again?

GRAMPS: I would if that's how it works. But I somehow feel that relationships in heaven are quite different to what they are on earth.

JOE: Do you often think about what sort of funeral you want?

GRAMPS: Not really, I don't expect I'll be bothered about it on the day so it doesn't really matter! Anyway, don't I have another six years, on average, to think about it? I know your Grandma had chosen all the hymns for her funeral ten years before she

died but I'll just take it as it comes. I suppose if I was to make any comment about my funeral I want it to be happy but not a festival. I hate those funerals where you walk into the crematorium with some crooner singing "We'll Meet Again" or "The Carnival Is Over". What's wrong with a good old hymn or two? And I'd like less time spent by people telling stories about how wonderful I was and more time on hearing God's word about life and death and eternal life.

JOE: I'll keep that in mind if I'm involved in planning your funeral. Well, thanks for the insight you have given me. I really think of you as a trail blazer, walking a track that I hope to walk one day.

GRAMPS: And try to drive more slowly. I'd hate to have to go to *your* funeral!

IN EASTWOOD PARK

SCENE: *Harry and Ken are jogging in opposite directions past a park bench. As they pass each other they stop.*

HARRY: O hi, Ken, you're out early.

KEN: So are you. How many steps have you done so far?

HARRY: *(looks at his smart watch)* Over 5000. My daily target is 10000.

KEN: I've only just started, but I'm puffed out already. How about if we sit down for a few minutes and catch up.

They sit on the bench.

KEN: I haven't seen you at church for a few months.

HARRY: Oh, I've found a new church that suits me much better – the Church of the Rising Sun. Cute name, isn't it – double meaning. 'Rising Sun' suggests that we're looking to the future ...

KEN: I get it – and ‘rising sun’ suggests “the risen Son”. So what’s so good about the Church of the Rising Sun?

HARRY: I like their teaching.

KEN: In what way?

HARRY: Well they’re really Bible based. And it’s all so simple. There’s never any uncertainty. There’s a clear answer to every question. I once went to a study group at the Uniting Church and the minister kept asking us lots of questions, and whenever we asked him what the Bible passage means he’d say, “well, it depends on the interpretation” and then he’d spend five minutes exploring different points of view. You’d think that with all his training he’d know all the answers.

KEN: So your new minister?

HARRY: He just tells us the answers and we write them down.

KEN: But the Bible is a difficult book to interpret, and there are often several layers of meaning.

HARRY: I think that’s just a cop-out. All this Biblical scholarship just clouds the issue. Our minister says you just read the straight-forward message. And there’s a clear answer to every question. It’s a bit like Mathematics. I loved Maths at

school for that very reason. You know where you are. An answer is either right or wrong and you don't get schools of thought where some say that six times seven is forty-two and others say that there's a deeper layer of meaning where it's twenty-four.

KEN: Well, actually, there *are* parts of Mathematics where things aren't so clear cut. I did a course at Uni on infinite set theory and it opened my mind to some of the deep mysteries of Mathematics.

HARRY: What's infinite set theory when it's at home?

KEN: It's something that underlies all of Maths. A set is just a collection of things like numbers and there are infinitely many of them.

HARRY: So, what's new? Even *I* knew that.

KEN: But did you know that there are many infinities, bigger and bigger ones? And there's even an arithmetic of infinities.

HARRY: Come off it.

KEN: It's true. A fellow called Georg Cantor discovered this in the late 19th century. What's even more remarkable is that there are some questions that one can pose about these infinities where there's no answer. You can make some statements about

infinities for which we'll never know whether they are true or false.

HARRY: But such a statement has to be either true or false. So it is just a question of time till some bright genius can decide which. You can't say that we can *never* know the answer.

KEN: In fact mathematicians have proved that it is logically impossible for us to ever know the answer. They can prove that it's logically *impossible* to prove that they're true and it's logically *impossible* to prove that they're false. So your genius can only answer the question by defying the laws of logic.

HARRY: So you're telling me that such things become articles of faith, like a belief in God.

KEN: Well, yes. After all, all of Mathematics is built on certain basic assumptions that you can't prove. You can't prove anything out of nothing. So these basic assumptions in Maths are like a religious creed. And some of these involve infinite numbers.

HARRY: It sounds like nonsense to me! You seem to be saying that there are different types of Mathematics depending on the fundamental assumptions. So if an engineer rejects one of these axioms her bridge might collapse because she's using the wrong sort of Mathematics!

KEN: No, when it comes to that part of Mathematics that can be applied to the real world it seems that all these variant Mathematics agree, though we can't prove that.

HARRY: I'm only interested in practical things, so I want the simplest Mathematics one can get. Why are you bamboozling me with all these uncertainties?

KEN: I just wanted to point out that there is mystery and complexity in all knowledge – even in mathematics. I suppose that's because all knowledge comes from God who is both mysterious and complex.

HARRY: But the Bible is so clear cut on how we should live our lives. It's obviously against gay marriage, women ministers, abortion and euthanasia.

KEN: It's not as simple as it seems. Take gay marriage for example. The Bible *does* come down pretty strongly against homosexuality. But you have to remember that in the ancient world homosexuality was largely something heterosexual men did for a lark and it was always associated with licentiousness and orgies. The modern phenomenon of two gay people living monogamously with each other in a stable and loving permanent relationship was unknown in Biblical times. So it's the licentiousness that the Bible is against, not the same sex bit. Medical science is coming round to believe that

homosexuality is not a life-style choice but is rather hard wired for some individuals. So if God created men and women that way shouldn't we accept that and the fact that they should have the same rights as the rest of us.

HARRY: I'm not so sure about that. But let's come to euthanasia.

KEN: I know many very nice young Asian people.

HARRY: Sorry?

KEN: You mentioned youth in Asia.

HARRY: No! Euthanasia – assisted dying. According to the Bible it's either suicide or murder. Only God can decide when a life should end. Only when it's God's will that a person should die should their life come to an end. Anything that goes against God's will is clearly wrong.

KEN: To tell you the truth, I'm very wary of euthanasia myself. But the argument that something that seems to go against God's will is wrong can be dangerous. Any medical intervention can be outlawed on that principle because, for example, if you have cancer then you could argue that it's God's will that you should die and chemotherapy could be considered going against what God has ordained.

HARRY: But that's nonsense.

KEN: That's exactly what I'm saying. God, through evolution, has set up things, such as the immune system but that doesn't mean He's against medical innovations such as chemotherapy or immunization. He gave us brains to come up with ways of *improving* on Nature.

HARRY: So don't tell me that you're in favour of euthanasia.

KEN: On the contrary, I don't like the idea. But I wouldn't want to rule it out altogether even though I think it would be wrong for it to be the normal way people end their lives. I think we should be extremely cautious and build into our legislation very stringent safeguards. But nor should we feel that it is a complete no-no. Above all we should continue to strive for better palliative care.

HARRY: And what about abortion. Surely that's wrong because it involves the taking of a life.

KEN: The difficulty here is in determining when life begins. It certainly doesn't start the moment we move down the birth canal. We're starting to get legislation that gives an unborn baby human rights. But I can't accept that a single fertilised cell is a human being.

HARRY: So where do you draw the line?

KEN: That's the problem – you can't. It's like asking how much hair you have to lose before you can be considered to be bald.

HARRY: But a single fertilised egg may not be a person, but it's a *potential* person.

KEN: That's the argument that's often used against contraception. You could say that the baby that you're preventing by contraception is a potential person and it's wrong to deny it life.

HARRY: Yes I do believe that contraception is wrong. It's thwarting God's plan.

KEN: But suppose that I propose to a girl and she turns me down. Now if we *had* married we would probably have had kids, but because she turned me down those kids will never be born. So is she guilty of murder because she's prevented some potential human beings from being born?

HARRY: Now you're being silly.

KEN: No, I'm just pointing out that *potential* human beings are not actual human beings and so the fact that a single fertilised egg is merely a potential human being doesn't give it human status.

HARRY: So it seems that you're in favour of abortion.

KEN: Only in certain circumstances. There are many circumstances where I would consider it to be the right thing to do. For example if a woman is pregnant following a rape or if the foetus has a severe abnormality, abortion should be allowed – up to a certain point in the pregnancy. But it shouldn't be seen as one of the normal methods of contraception. People say that a woman should be allowed to control her own body and, to a large extent I go along with that. But what is often overlooked is the fact that sometimes a woman who has aborted a baby later feels guilt or regrets the decision. It's not an easy question. To decide what is right in a particular case is difficult enough, but to make up a set of rules to cover all circumstances would be extremely complex.

HARRY: But I want moral questions to be easy. The orthodox Jews have it easy. You only have to remember all the rules, and follow them. You don't have to think through why they should be followed. Christians, it seems, are supposed to make up their own rules, depending on circumstances, ethics according to the situation.

KEN: Well, yes, but although there are many rules in the Bible, there is a large number that modern Christians are perfectly happy to ignore, such as the dietary rules of the Old Testament or the injunction

to wash one another's feet in the New Testament. What Christians have are values, *principles*, not rules. The principle of Love should be our guide. After all, Jesus himself broke the Old Testament rules by healing on the Sabbath, and he justified this by appealing to the principal of Love.

HARRY: You make Christianity so complicated that you have to have a PhD to be a Christian!

KEN: On the contrary. Simple uneducated people can't cope with myriads of rules so they just follow instinct, and the principal of Love. You could say that this instinct is the Holy Spirit working in their lives. More educated people often get bogged down with rules and, like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus, become fixated on fine points of law. But great minds are able to rise above the rigidity of rules and recognise that, in the end, the principal of Love reigns supreme. Of course it's not always easy to work out how that principal should operate in a specific situation. So the Christian faith is both very simple and very complex. Now, what was the other matter you wanted to discuss? Oh yes, whether women should have positions of authority in the Church.

HARRY: That one's easy. My minister at the Church of the Rising Sun, says they shouldn't and says that women's brains are less developed than men's and the fact that Jesus was a man proves that

God only entrusts his truth to men. I like the church, and the minister, but I don't agree with him on that.

KEN: So, you're not so certain after all?! And you're happy to go against what is clearly stated in Paul's writings?

HARRY: You've got me thinking about values rather than certainties. I remember the minister at the Uniting Church say that there were specific problems with women in certain early churches and that he was addressing these specific issues rather than laying down universal rules? Maybe there is some value in what the Uniting Church minister is saying, after all.

KEN: Yes, I do remember that, too, and he said that it was a cultural thing. Our world is completely different with regards to women's place in society and the Church has been blessed by female ministers as much as male ones. Well, it's nice talking to you, Harry. Hope I run into you again.

HARRY: Yes, see you later.

They start jogging off in the opposite directions to the ones they had arrived in. Ken stops and turns and calls out.

KEN: Hey Harry, you were going the other way when we met up.

HARRY: Whoops! I was distracted by thinking about our conversation. After our conversation I'm going to go a different way. Bye

KEN: See you at the Uniting Church, then. Bye!

They both turn around and jog back in their original directions.

AT COVENT GARDEN

SCENE: *Nigel and Bruce are at the ballet, sitting in a box at Covent Garden theatre.*

BRUCE: That was a great idea of yours to order a box for us. Now we can chat to each other throughout the performance without disturbing anyone.

NIGEL: Yes I thought you might get bored with the ballet so I booked this box for the two of us two and I got seats in the stalls for our partners. There's your wife Rosemary down there and there's my partner, Peter.

They wave to those two in the stalls.

NIGEL: The ballet is about to begin.

BRUCE: I don't know what Rosemary sees in all this stuff. She insisted I come too but I'd rather watch Manchester United play Chelsea.

NIGEL: I really enjoy the ballet. This one is *Swan Lake* and it's so beautiful.

BRUCE: Oh, I'm sorry. I won't talk any more.

NIGEL: Oh no, that's alright – I've seen it many times. Besides I can multi-task and listen to the ballet while we talk. So you enjoy football?

BRUCE: Oh, it's really awesome the way some of the great players can outwit their opponents.

NIGEL: I think I would be just as bored at a football match as you are watching ballet.

BRUCE: I would be bored if I had to sit down there next to Rosemary and sit still. We've got different tastes ... but I like talking to you. So what shall we talk about?

NIGEL: We could talk about our faith. We're both Christians so we've got a lot in common.

BRUCE: OK. Well what did your minister preach about last Sunday?

NIGEL: He preached on *The Hope of Heaven*.

BRUCE: There now, I think that if there's one thing more boring than ballet, it must be Heaven. I only want to go to Heaven because the alternative is highly unattractive ... all that fire and brimstone. But I don't think I would enjoy Heaven ... unless they play footy up there. Do you think they do?

NIGEL: I don't think so. But there won't be any ballet either.

BRUCE: But they do play harps all day, don't they? You'd probably like that.

NIGEL: I don't think there'll be any harps either.

BRUCE: But the Bible is always talking about angels playing harps 'to the glory of God' so even if we don't have to learn to *play* them we'll be forced to listen to them.

NIGEL: I quite enjoy harp music, but I don't think there'll be any in Heaven.

BRUCE: And what about all those pearly gates and streets of gold. It was bad enough having to traipse around all those cathedrals when Rosemary and I went on holiday on the continent last year. And I never want to see another Russian religious icon for the rest of my life, with all that gold leaf.

NIGEL: But Heaven will be full of pleasures that we couldn't possibly understand in this life. The biblical writers just used harps and pearly gates and streets of gold as metaphors. I believe the joy of Heaven will be totally different to any earthly pleasure and will surpass them all.

BRUCE: Well why didn't the biblical authors come straight out and tell us what Heaven will really be like ... instead of all those silly metaphors.

NIGEL: But, as I just said, our earthly language isn't able to express the joys of Heaven. Just imagine that you had to describe football to some native on a remote desert island and suppose the people on this island have only just come into contact with the outside world and had never heard of football, let alone watched a match. Imagine you had to describe football in the local language. You'd probably say that football is like a war between two tribes. One tribe starts at one end of the beach and the other tribe starts at the other end. They run up and down kicking a piece of leather.

BRUCE: They may not know what 'leather' is.

NIGEL: Well perhaps you could say it was a coconut. Anyway, the two tribes have to kick this coconut up and down the beach until it goes between two certain trees at one end or the other of the beach. Do you think the native would find it as fascinating as you do? He'd probably say that "there be many coconuts under dat tree so I go pick up one near dem two trees and let other fellers fight over other coconut".

BRUCE: I see what you mean. And, come to think about it, I can't think how I'd explain the off side

rules to a native. I can't even get Rosemary to understand them.

NIGEL: Well we're all a bit like that when it comes to Heaven. We're incapable of understanding what Heaven will be like. We're just like the native who'd much rather lie in the sun than go running after a silly coconut.

BRUCE: Perhaps there's something even more enjoyable than soccer in the Eternal City. But it won't be much fun for you if there's no ballet there and, if I believe you, not even harps!

NIGEL: There was a Christian writer, once, who wrote about 'desire'.

BRUCE: Isn't there something in the Bible about putting away all earthly desires? I think the Bible teaches us to get rid of all desires ... a bit like the Buddhists. We should learn to live without having any fun. I believe that a person without desires would make a good Christian, but I haven't yet overcome my desire to see a good game of footie.

NIGEL: But Christianity is diametrically opposite to Buddhism when it comes to desire and enjoyment. The Buddhist strives for a life without desire whereas Christianity teaches that desire is not only permitted, it is central to the Christian faith.

BRUCE: I can't believe that I'm hearing this. How do you support this radical view? Do you mean I should go to strip clubs to satisfy my desire for a woman's body?

NIGEL: Of course not. C.S. Lewis said that all earthly desires are good, in fact they're all a desire for God – if only we could see that. It isn't the desire itself that's wrong. It's our stupidity in not recognising that what we are *really* desiring is God. And then there are all the inappropriate ways we go about trying to satisfy that desire. He said that every desire is, at heart, really a desire for God. But many of these desires can get horribly distorted.

BRUCE: I don't get that. Years ago I used to smoke ... two packets a day. I'd wake up in the morning with a desire for a fag.

NIGEL: I presume you mean cigarette. You have to be careful with that word. When I was in the U.S.A. I said I was dying for a fag and I got these strange stares. Apparently there it means a homosexual.

BRUCE: Point taken. Well I'd wake up in the morning dying for a cigarette. Then ten minutes later I'd want another. You can't tell me that my desire for a cigarette was really a desire for God, in disguise. That's nonsense!

NIGEL: You have to look beyond the object that you think you desire. What you desired was not a cigarette. It was the kick that the nicotine gave you. You felt more alert. It was the feeling of being better able to perform your work that you desired, not the nicotine.

BRUCE: That might have been true when I first started. There was also, probably, a desire to be accepted by my mates as one of the gang. I was only smoking a couple of cigs a day back then. But then I found that a couple of cigarettes didn't satisfy me. So I gradually increased the number until I was chain smoking. I finally had to have therapy to help me quit.

NIGEL: You thought you desired cigarettes but in fact you desired mental alertness and self-esteem in the company of your peers.

BRUCE: But that's hardly a desire for God.

NIGEL: Well, God gave you mental gifts and you can be more aware of the presence of God when you are mentally alert. But you have since discovered that there are other ways of being mentally alert that are not so destructive. And you were created in God's image. Having a healthy self-esteem is one way of honouring God. Pride in one's achievements is a good thing. It's only when it turns into an unhealthy arrogance that it becomes corrupted.

BRUCE: So you're saying that my desire for football is really a desire for God?

NIGEL: You probably think that what you desire is the sport itself. But behind that is a desire for excitement and for the sheer magic when a top player achieves the impossible. It's God who gives the player his or her great talent, and excitement is a quality that I'm sure we'll find when we're with God. They say at funerals, "may she rest in peace", but while resting in peace might be appropriate when someone has battled with cancer for a long time it would be boring to be resting in peace for all eternity! I strongly believe that Heaven will be far from that. 'Peace' perhaps, but certainly not 'resting'. There will be excitement in Heaven, though what it will be like is more than I can tell.

BRUCE: So your desire for music and dance is really a desire for God?

NIGEL: Most certainly. I've had moments of sublime emotion when listening to music or watching a ballet. I've felt at these moments that it is the music that I really wanted. I once felt this when playing a certain piece on a DVD. I wanted to repeat the feeling by playing it over and over. After a few times the music seemed banal and I no longer felt any emotion. It was a bit like your cigarettes. I soon realised that my desire was not for the music itself but for the sublime feeling that was awakened by the

music at that time. I soon came to realise that the music itself didn't really satisfy my desire. The desire went far beyond. It's like being in a prison and glimpsing a beautiful garden through the bars. We might think that the limited view is what we desire. Then one day, when we're released and we can roam the whole garden freely, we realise that what we were really desiring was the freedom, and the fresh air. And behind *these* desires is a desire for God.

BRUCE: Well, there's a lot to think about there. Let me tell you about my church. I used to enjoy the serenity of the services, but lately they've been jazzing it up in ways that I feel are disrespectful to our Lord. They've started including hymns without all the thee's and thou's and they've even included a saxophone accompaniment to the piano. In fact they're using the piano as much as the organ these days. I don't know why they can't use the organ all the time ... goodness knows we paid enough to get it restored last year. The other Sunday we even had a hymn set to the tune of the *Dambuster's March*. I mean, how disrespectful is that? And the new minister even makes jokes in his sermons. The last straw was last Sunday when they had this young girl dancing out the front during one of the hymns. I'm going to have to find another church where the service is conducted in a more reverential manner.

NIGEL: I'm sorry to hear that you don't relate to the joy and happiness that seems to have crept into your

church services with this new minister. I agree that there's a place for quiet reflection and seriousness. But there's also a place for joy and exuberance. The Psalms are full of injunctions to 'make a joyful noise unto the Lord' and Jesus himself was often found at parties, celebrating someone or other's wedding. And, if you read the Gospels carefully, you'll find that Jesus often made jokes to get his point across. He was great with the humour of exaggeration. When he said that if you have the faith of a mustard seed you can tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea. His listeners, used to this sort of exaggerated humour, would never have taken him literally. For a start why would anyone want to throw a mountain into the sea? But generations of devout Christians have taken him literally. His point was that lots of things that we might have thought impossible can be achieved through faith, and that has been proved true over the centuries. No, Jesus was certainly no wet blanket and he knew how to have fun.

BRUCE: Well, talking about 'desire', usually 'desire' means the desire of a man for a woman.

NIGEL: Or the desire of a man for a man.

BRUCE: Of course, or a woman for either a man or a woman. Now for me, my love for Rosemary seems to be stronger than my love for God. I know I should love God more than *anything* else, or *anyone* else, but it's hard. I love Rosemary more because ... she's

there beside me. I can touch her, and laugh with her. God seems much more remote. That worries me sometimes.

NIGEL: Don't let it worry you. Don't forget that when you love someone really special you are really loving God through them.

BRUCE: I don't get that.

NIGEL: Well God created Rosemary and she has certain qualities that came from God. You have a lot in common with her but there are also many differences. And you love her for that. She laughs much more than you do and you enjoy her laughter. Inasmuch as you love Rosemary you are loving God. But you don't worship her. That would make your desire for her stop right there and it wouldn't be translated into a love for God.

BRUCE: I used to tell her that I worshipped the ground she walked on.

NIGEL: That's different. Young love generally goes to extremes and you say all sorts of silly things when you're first discovering each other. But you don't *really* adore her as one might adore an idol.

BRUCE: That's true. Sometimes she really infuriates me.

NIGEL: But you still love her, right?

BRUCE: Of course.

NIGEL: Her good points, and I'm sure she has many, are aspects of God's personality. When you think you're admiring *her* you're also admiring God who created her, even if you aren't aware of it at the time.

BRUCE: So is that why we promise to love and honour our partner 'until death us do part'?

NIGEL: Yes. In this world we can glimpse God through people we meet, and especially through our life's partner. But *then* we shall see God face to face and experience the whole of his Person.

BRUCE: So I won't see Rosemary in Heaven?

NIGEL: We don't know the details of eternal life. I would expect that you *would* because she's become part of who you are. But look, they're just ending Act I so we'd better join the others for drinks in the interval.

They walk out.

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

SCENE: *Church*

JAMES: I'm glad you were able to come to my church this Sunday. I didn't realise that it was so early. The service doesn't start for another fifteen minutes. I suppose I could spend the time in silent prayer.

TOM: Oh, you can speak to God any time. You've got me to talk to now.

JAMES: I suppose so. Are you going to the Spring Fair next Saturday?

TOM: Probably – that is, provided we have fair weather that day. Hey, do you think that's why they call it a 'fair'? Perhaps God says, "I'd better not make it rain on Saturday because of the Spring Fair, so forecast will be fair weather!"

JAMES: They might call it a 'fair' the organisers don't want to be accused of going over the top with their advertising. If they called it a Spring Poor nobody would come and if they called it a Spring

Excellent they might be criticised if it didn't come up to expectations. Better to call it a Spring Fair.

TOM: You're not serious are you?

JAMES: Of course not, but when you think about it there are so many different meanings of the word 'fair'.

TOM: That's true. I don't suppose My Fair Lady meant she was just mediocre. If you call a lady 'fair' you usually mean she's quite pretty – not just average.

JAMES: Or it could mean that she has light-coloured hair. 'Fair' is the opposite to "dark".

TOM: And 'fare' is what you pay when you get on a bus.

JAMES: Ha! ha! Let's be fair and just stick to F-A-I-R. There's the 'fair' in the word "fairway" on a golf course.

TOM: I think that got its name because somebody once asked how far that long bit of grass goes and they were told "Oh, it goes a fair way".

JAMES: I've just Googled 'fair' and come up with Fair Trading.

TOM: Yes that sort of fairness is probably the most common meaning. We all want fair play. God should have created the world so that everything is fair. But there's so much unfairness around these days. Even sport, which was once considered to be fair, is riddled with unfair practices.

JAMES: Parents are supposed to be fair to their children, but no – even they have their favourites.

TOM: I would have thought that your parents are pretty fair. They're wonderful people.

JAMES: You'd think so wouldn't you? But they aren't. You remember my sister Betty?

TOM: Oh she was the wild one, wasn't she? She ran off with some guy and got herself pregnant.

JAMES: She was on drugs, and she used to steal from Mum and Dad. She even stole my gold watch and pawned it. Then she went off one day with her drug dealer boyfriend. Of course she got pregnant, didn't she? And naturally he didn't marry her. After two years he dumped her, leaving her with two little girls. I think the boyfriend went off overseas. She certainly couldn't get any money out of him.

TOM: Oh the poor girl!

JAMES: What do you mean by “poor girl”? She knew what she was doing. If people make bad choices in life they have to suffer the consequences.

TOM: How did she cope?

JAMES: Well somehow she got off the drugs. She had to, with two little girls to look after. She got a job as a barmaid and got a prostitute friend to look after the girls. Luckily the working day for a prostitute doesn’t start until the pubs have closed.

TOM: Well, what has this got to do with fairness?

JAMES: At first Mum and Dad had no idea where she was living, but when they tracked her down they started sending her money to help out.

TOM: And ...

JAMES: Well, I was having to pay board to Mum and Dad while they were paying her an allowance.

TOM: But you were thirty and had a good job. Don’t you think you *should* be paying board?

JAMES: Not if it was my money that was going to Betty to prop up her sinful life. To make matters worse, she lost her job and wrote to my folks to ask if she could come home. She said she didn’t want to come home as a daughter, but she could work for

them as a cleaner, and cook their meals. She said she could sleep in the old caravan in the backyard. But of course they wouldn't hear of it.

TOM: You mean they wouldn't accept her back?

JAMES: Oh they accepted her back alright. But they said that they didn't want her as a servant. She could help out, of course, if she had time with looking after her girls but there would be no formal arrangement. She was accepted back as a daughter, not as a servant.

TOM: So she didn't have to pay rent for the old caravan.

JAMES: Oh, no. Mum and dad insisted on her living in the house. So I got kicked out.

TOM: I see what you mean. That doesn't seem fair. Why that old caravan would be pretty cold in the winter.

JAMES: Oh, I still kept my bedroom. But I used to have a second room that I used to store all my stuff. Well the girls got moved in there and so I had to move my stuff out into the caravan. It just isn't fair. Mum and Dad were over the moon about Betty and her girls coming home they put on a big party. Talk about the fatted calf. It's just like that story in the Bible.

TOM: But why shouldn't your parents be happy to have Betty come back home, especially as she'd settled down and was no longer on drugs.

JAMES: But what did *I* get? I'm the one who's always gone to church. I never went on drugs. I never ran off and lived with a no-hoper. I've never got a girl pregnant. And all the girls I've dated over the years have been good church girls. But did I get a big party for staying at home? Noo ... Did I get a reduction in my board for having to move my things out to the caravan? Noo...

TOM: So how much do you pay your folks, if you don't mind me asking?

JAMES: A hundred dollars a week. I know it's not a lot, but it's the principal of the thing. I mean fair is fair.

TOM: What about their will. Do you think everything will go to your sister?

JAMES: No, they say they're leaving everything fifty-fifty. But they also say they have the right to be more generous to Betty because of her need. Never mind that the reason why she has a need is because of her bad choices.

TOM: Has she thrown off her old life?

JAMES: More or less. She now goes to church, but that's probably just to keep in good with Mum and Dad. And she keeps up with that prostitute friend who used to babysit for her. She's even got her to come to church with her.

TOM: And your parents are OK with that?

JAMES: Oh yes, they even invite her to our house for meals. I try to be out when she comes. A good Christian shouldn't mix with low life. We have to remain pure. But when Betty got the girls christened I couldn't run away. Would you believe it? Betty chose *her* to be godmother and *me* to be godfather. So I had to stand up in front of our church next to an ex-prostitute. It was *so* embarrassing.

TOM: You say "ex-prostitute". Is she no longer "on the game"?

JAMES: No, Dad got her a legit job. But once a prostitute, always a prostitute I say.

TOM: Well, if you think your parents weren't fair, let me tell you about something that happened to my cousin when he went fruit-picking out Orange way. He heard about this job picking cherries.

JAMES: Shouldn't that be "oranges"?

TOM: No, they were cherries. Anyway the ad said “\$160 per day from 8am till 4pm.” That sounded like good money – twenty dollars an hour. So Bob signed up. After he’d been working in the hot sun for four hours these two guys came up, asking for a job. The farmer agreed to take them on, but get this. He offered to pay them \$160 for what was left of the day. Now that’s what I call grossly unfair.

JAMES: But your cousin thought he was getting good money. So why should he be dissatisfied just because someone else is doing even better? That’s how the capitalist system works. But what gets my goat is our tax system. The more you earn, not only do you pay more tax but you pay a higher *rate* of tax. I think we should all pay the same tax, irrespective of what we earn.

TOM: You mean a flat tax, like 20 cents in the dollar?

JAMES: No I mean we should all pay the same dollar amount, like ten thousand dollars a year.

TOM: But some people don’t even earn that much!

JAMES: Well, they should get a job which pays enough for them to be able to pay that ten thousand dollars a year. I mean imagine if at the supermarket those of us who earn more had to pay more for our groceries. What if our Opal Card was linked to the

Tax Office and the amount charged for each journey was a certain percentage of our income! Would that be fair?

TOM: But taxation is based upon need and ability to pay. The world is inherently unfair. Some of us lack the ability to get good jobs. Some of us are disabled and can't work at all. Taxation is a way of making things a little less unfair.

JAMES: I guess. But last week's reading in our church was the parable of the talents? You probably had it too. The rich man goes off into a far country, and before he leaves he gives ten thousand dollars to each of his three investment bankers. The first is prudent and puts it in a Westpac account at 2 per cent interest. The second is a bit more adventurous and invests in shares. The third goes to Randwick and puts it all on High Jinx at twenty to one, and the horse wins.

When the rich man returns after a year the first banker says, "I knew you were a hard man and would be unhappy if you made a loss so I put your money into a Westpac account at 2 percent. So after deducting my management fees here's the balance of nine thousand and twenty dollars.

The second banker says "the ASX did well this year and, after management fees, here's eleven thousand dollars". The third banker says "You did well, thanks to me. High Jinx came in at twenty to

one. So here is your ten thousand dollars, plus another hundred thousand.”

“Shouldn’t it be more than that?” asks the rich man. The third banker says “I put some of the winnings on the next race and lost it – still, you didn’t do too badly.”

TOM: I don’t quite remember it sounding like that. Which version are you quoting from?

JAMES: My own. But what I don’t get is that it’s the one who, by a fluke, made the most money is the one who is rewarded. That doesn’t seem fair.

TOM: Getting back to your sister Betty, I don’t think I’ve met her. Is she a good looker?

JAMES: That’s her sitting over near the window with her girl-friend. Betty’s the one with the fair hair.

TOM: How come you’re not sitting with your sister?

JAMES: What, and have to sit next to her ex-prostitute friend?

TOM: I don’t think you’re being fair to either of them. Hmm that friend is fairly good-looking but Betty is a fair stunner. You’ll have to introduce her to me after the service.

JAMES: Shh! The minister's about to start the service.

WAITING FOR THE 545

SCENE: *Bus shelter. Anthony already seated, reading a book. Mark enters.*

MARK: Hi there. Mind if I join you?

ANTHONY: Good to see you.

MARK: Hope I'm not interrupting important reading.

ANTHONY: It's OK – this is a book about trivia in the Bible.

MARK: I thought the Bible was about important things, not trivia.

ANTHONY: This is about little-known facts in the Bible.

MARK: Such as?

ANTHONY: Well, do you know how many verses in the Bible are about prayer?

MARK: No

ANTHONY: About 500. And how many verses speak about money?

MARK: 250?

ANTHONY: No. Over 2000

MARK: Wow! I wonder why Jesus was so obsessed with economics.

ANTHONY: What do you mean?

MARK: Well, there's all that investment advice about storing your treasure where moth and rust can't get to it.

ANTHONY: He was only using that as a metaphor. The treasure he was talking about was

MARK: Oh, I know all about that but so many of his parables are about money.

ANTHONY: That's what people are interested in

ANTHONY: You mean the lost coin?

MARK: Like parable of the talents. Jesus had it in for that guy who just buried the investment in a non-interest bearing account.

ANTHONY: Yes, while the others took a risk and increased their master's money.

MARK: But wouldn't they have been in trouble if the investment had gone bad? It's all very well to put your own money in some risky investment that promises to double your money but you shouldn't risk someone else's money.

ANTHONY: But again Jesus was using money as a metaphor. He was talking about God's gift of talents. If you have a gift for music perhaps you should get lessons instead of letting that talent go to waste. I remember someone boasting that they would have been a great pianist if only they'd had lessons!

MARK: Then there's the parable of the sower we had in our church last month. Some seed fell on bad soil and didn't grow while other seed fell on good soil and had a profitable yield.

ANTHONY: Yes, Jesus explained that parable. The seed is God's word and the sower is the Lord. We are the soil, and some of us are unresponsive.

MARK: But I think Jesus got it wrong.

ANTHONY: That's an interesting call. How could he? I guess he was a carpenter, not a farmer. But it was still *his* parable.

MARK: But don't you think that the sower was pretty careless in tossing the seed all about? Surely Jesus wouldn't be that careless.

ANTHONY: I think it's simply a scattergun approach – all very random. Perhaps it's a bit like God raining on both the just and the unjust. Everyone gets the same opportunity to receive God's word – the unreceptive as well as the receptive.

MARK: Well maybe that's one interpretation, but I like to think that the sower is me and you on a mission to spread God's word. Like a wise farmer we should be careful where we sow. It only makes sense to sow the seed in good soil. The church should focus its mission on those who are most likely to respond.

ANTHONY: Perhaps a good carpenter doesn't make a wise farmer

MARK: Come on, you know what I mean!

ANTHONY: So you think the church ought to be much more targeted with its mission? So that you spend time and energy where there is likely to be the most productive outcomes.

MARK: Yes

ANTHONY: So you won't be the one putting up your hand to teach SRE with the Year 8 students at the local high school then? And what about prison chaplains? Do you think they would be better off deployed in preaching to the almost converted?

MARK: Maybe. At any rate our mission should be towards the waverers rather than those who've rejected or ignored God. We put so much effort into getting *new* people into our churches without noticing that some of our own people are getting frustrated or upset and are likely to leave the church. It's a bit like trying to fill up a sieve.

ANTHONY: At my church they have Elders to look after the church's own people, and our minister is always banging on about Matthew 28 – go and make disciples.

MARK: But not at the cost of neglecting those who are already part of the church.

ANTHONY: So let me see if I've got this right: you're saying we should never try to reach out to those beyond our own community. It might seem to be a good idea to focus on those who are receptive to the gospel. But remember God doesn't work that way. God sometimes chose the most unlikely people. Look at St Paul for example.

MARK: But we're not God. If we only have limited resources we should give some thought as to who we target. We shouldn't throw the seed about carelessly.

ANTHONY: But that's what Jesus teaches.

MARK: And I think Jesus may have been wrong.

ANTHONY: OK – let's say Jesus was wrong. And we do what you suggest, and scatter seed only among responsive ground, with responsive people. Where do you find responsive people? People don't go around with a placard "Receptive to God's Word".

MARK: Why not go around to other churches? There would be a lot of receptive people there!

ANTHONY: So you're saying we should infiltrate other churches in the area and try to persuade people to come to our church? I don't believe it! Jesus said "*make* disciples", not *take* disciples.

MARK: Well wouldn't it make things easier. Those people already have the foundations laid. We'd just have to show them that we do things better than their own churches.

ANTHONY: But that would be outlandish – poaching people from other churches.

MARK: But if we preach a more powerful message, or have better hymns why shouldn't we advertise the

fact? If a telephone company comes knocking on my door and tries to offer me a better deal by switching providers I might not be interested. But nobody would think it terribly wrong. It's just healthy competition. Why is the church any different?

ANTHONY: Next thing you'll be telling me that we can advertise that if you switch to our church you won't have to put any money in the plate for the first three months!

MARK: You always come up with such great ideas!

ANTHONY: Our church marketing team would have great fun. Come to our Church – instead of 10 commandments, we can have only seven, and it's your choice which seven.

MARK: Now you're on the money. That's the way to attract people to the church.

ANTHONY: I wasn't serious. Anyway our mission isn't simply to increase our size at all costs. Our mission is to reach out to those who haven't heard God's word.

MARK: Do you think that there's anyone in Australia who hasn't heard about God?

ANTHONY: Sometimes I think everyone has. When you watch TV shows all the people say “Oh my God”.

MARK: You know what I mean!

ANTHONY: Well perhaps our mission is to those who might have heard the gospel but haven’t acted upon it. People who go to other churches are already actively seeking God.

MARK: Well every church has its waverers. If we *infiltrate* and keep our ear to the ground we might become aware of some whose faith is going cold. Rather than have them leave the church completely we could *grab* them into our own community. You see the parable of the sower instructs us to focus on the soil that has already been prepared and is fertilised rather than on the stony ground. It’s a question of efficiency.

ANTHONY: So you think that we should send out little teams into other churches to be ready to pounce on those who drift away.

MARK: Well, we couldn’t be accused of proselytising if we waited till they actually left that other church.

ANTHONY: I still don’t think it is a good idea to interfere in other people’s churches. But perhaps

what you say about preventative medicine in our own community is worth considering. We mustn't let our enthusiasm for reaching out to interfere with giving real support to those within our community. I suppose it's too easy to assume that those we have will always be with us.

MARK: Yes, we could have a forum in which we allowed people to whinge about concerns they might have in the life of our church.

ANTHONY: But wouldn't a whinging session detract from the positive outlook we're trying to foster? If people don't like something in our church they have the opportunity to speak to their Elder, or at a congregational meeting.

MARK: But many people aren't like that. It's so much easier to vote with one's feet. Somehow we need to be aware of what our people are really thinking. Often the first we hear about a problem, or a perceived problem, is when someone stops coming.

ANTHONY: So you think we don't really need to market our message to the wider community?

MARK: Well if we concentrated our efforts on making sure our worship experience is a quality product we wouldn't need to do much outreach. As they say, if you build a better mousetrap the world

will beat a path to your door. You wouldn't need to spend a lot of effort in advertising.

ANTHONY: And would you be the one who defines 'quality product'.

MARK: Maybe!

ANTHONY: The trouble is that in today's world the church gets such a bad press. People don't walk through our doors because they think they know what church is like but they're quite wrong. They think we're a bunch of pious fuddy duddies whose message is full of "Thou Shalt Nots". Or that we are a group of people who simply like things done the way they always have been. We have to go out into the world to show that we're not like that before we can expect to get them to come inside our church.

MARK: Well, maybe you're right. There's a lot of interest out there in spirituality and ethics. I suppose there might be many who don't go to other churches who might be responsive to God's Word.

ANTHONY: But you might have something too when you say that we shouldn't be so preoccupied with "reaching out" that we neglect our own community. I guess it all comes down to balance. But do you still think we should focus on poaching from other Christian communities?

MARK: No, I just said that to get you going.

ANTHONY: And if Jesus was alive today I suppose you think he'd be an economist?

MARK: No, probably he'd be a trade union leader. After all, didn't he say that we should all get the same pay no matter how many hours in the day we work?

MARK: Well, what do you think the parable of the sower really means?

ANTHONY: I think it emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelism. You know we sometimes get depressed when we try to spread the word and nobody responds. I think Jesus is saying that we should be sensitive to the spiritual awareness of people around us. The Holy Spirit prepares the ground and a word in season is all it needs. Getting up in Eastwood plaza and rattling on about Jesus may not be the best approach to evangelism.

MARK: I get it. We should look out for opportunities to sow the seed rather than use the scatter-gun approach.

ANTHONY: That's right. Wait till the Holy Spirit has prepared the ground. But pray for guidance as to where the opportunities lie. Too many people think evangelism is a game, where you keep score. I think

it's more about loving people you come into contact with and sowing the word comes naturally – in context.

MARK: That sounds the most economical way of dealing with it. I'm sure Jesus was very economical. I bet he saved his off-cuts to use in other jobs. Yes he was an economist as well as a carpenter. I wonder if there were any economists in the Old Testament?

ANTHONY: What about Noah? He floated his stock while the rest of the world went into liquidation!

TABLE TALK

SCENE: *Martin Luther's kitchen table*

This is based on Martin Luther's book: Table Talk, which is a collection of some of the things that he said in his many sermons, as well as little stories that he told his guests around a meal table. I have used the English translation by William Hazlitt, but I've taken the liberty of updating the language a little. However, I haven't added anything of substance. It's essentially all Martin Luther.

In this little drama, as well as Luther himself, there is his wife, Kate, and a visitor, Shane. Shane is a reporter from the Bennelong Times who has somehow managed to go back about five hundred years to interview the great professor. The year is 1525.

SHANE: It's so kind of you, Doctor Luther, to invite me to share your table for a meal. I have admired you ever since I heard that you posted up those ninety-five theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg.

MARTIN: Well, that story might be a little bit of imagination. But I *did* circulate them throughout Europe with the help of Gutenberg's invention. The printing press is the best invention since...toast. If only someone could invent sliced bread, that would

be the best thing ever. Anyway, welcome to my humble home. This is my wife and helpmate, Kate.

KATE: Pleased to meet you. I believe that you come from a long way away.

SHANE: Yes, I have travelled a distance of five hundred years, plus several thousand miles. I'm from a place called Australia.

KATE: Never heard of it. Is that one of the new lands that Christopher Columbus discovered recently?

SHANE: No. That's America. Australia is very different to America. (*Pause*) Except that the person with the largest Gutenberg-type printing press seems to have great influence in both countries.

KATE: What's that you are clutching? Would you like to put it down on the table?

SHANE: These? Oh yes, I have brought you a gift of ripe cherries from the world I come from. May I suggest that you hang them over the table during our meal, in remembrance of the Creation. We can praise God for creating such fruits.

MARTIN: Why not rather praise God for the gift of children. These are the fruit of one's own body? For these are far more excelling creatures of God than all

the fruits of trees. In them we see God's power, wisdom and art. God made them all out of nothing, gave them life and limbs, exquisitely constructed, and he will maintain and preserve them. Yet how little do we regard this. When people have children, all they can think about is raking together all the money they can, to leave behind for their children to inherit. They don't know that, before a child comes into the world, it has its lot assigned already, and that it is ordained and determined what and how much it shall have. In the married state we find that the conception of children depends not on our will and pleasure; we never know whether we will be fruitful or not, or whether God will give us a son or a daughter. All this goes on without our counsel. My father and mother didn't imagine that they should have brought a spiritual overseer into the world. It is God's work only, and this we can't enter into. I believe that, in the life to come, we shall have nothing to do, but to meditate on and marvel at our Creator and his creatures.

SHANE: I gather you have children of your own. So Doctor Luther, how long have you and Kate been married?

KATE: We will have been married twenty years next month. I used to be a nun, but I became disillusioned. However I wasn't allowed to leave the convent. There were twelve of us who wanted to escape and Martin managed to smuggle us out of the

convent. He went to the local Cooper to have twelve herring barrels made. We each hid in one of these barrels and Martin arranged for the supposedly empty barrels to be transported out of the convent!

Two years later, we were married. And it's been a barrel of fun ever since.

MARTIN: Yes, suddenly, and while I was occupied with far different thoughts, the Lord plunged me into marriage.

KATE: I was 26 years old when we married, and Martin was 41.

SHANE: And how many children do you have?

KATE: God has blessed us with six children, though Elizabeth died as a baby. And Magdalene died just a couple of years ago, so we only have four now.

MARTIN: Twenty years is but a short time, yet in that short time the world would become empty, if there was no marrying and production of children. God assembles unto himself a Christian Church out of little children. For I believe that, when a little child dies at one years old, or younger, as did our Elizabeth, two thousand will die with it – that is, in that year there will be two thousand in this city, of that age or younger, who will have died. But when I, Luther, die, I believe that a hundred at the most, will die with me of that age, or older; for people now

don't grow old. Not many people live to my years. Mankind is nothing else but a sheep-shambles, where we are slain and slaughtered by the devil. How many sorts of deaths are in our bodies? Nothing is therein but death.

KATE: Please excuse Martin. He's getting to be a grumpy old man these days!

SHANE: Moving along ... the thing that most people of my day think of when they hear the name Martin Luther, is that you spoke out against indulgences. We don't have such things so perhaps, for the benefit of my readers, you could tell us what they were and why you thought them to be so wrong.

MARTIN: Where do I start? An indulgence was like a ticket that, for a certain sum of money, was supposed to forgive certain sins and so reduce the time a person would have to spend in purgatory. Three crowns could take a whole week off. But of course it was just a trick to take money from the poor and stuff it into the coffers of the church. So, for a start, it was a practice that exploited the ordinary people. It was making money from the sincere penitence of the humble sinner so that the Church could become even richer. Remember that these sorts of things went on in the time of our Lord. He overturned the money tables at the temple. My vision for the church is that it should shun having extravagant wealth, and instead focus on the needs of

the people. I presume that over the next five hundred years the church has become more of a servant and less of a master.

SHANE: Well, we no longer sell indulgences or relics – not even the Bishop of Rome approves of such practices. But I must admit we still have some way to go before the Church sheds herself of excessive wealth.

MARTIN: That's a shame. Well, my second reason for condemning indulgences and relics is that they give people the impression that they can buy their way into heaven. Faith is all one needs – God does the rest.

SHANE: But what about the relics? To have in one's possession a nail from the true cross must have been a powerful devotional tool for the faithful. And I can understand why they must be expensive. There were only so many such nails and so it stands to reason that they would be somewhat pricey – the law of supply and demand.

MARTIN: I've never heard of such a law. Is it something that your emperor has decreed?

SHANE: It's something like a law of nature. And, no, we don't have an emperor in Australia. We have a constitutional monarchy. Henry VIII and all that.

You know, the man with the wives and the monasteries.

MARTIN: I hope there weren't too many like him.

SHANE: No, There have been a few Georges, a Victoria, two Elizabeths, and a couple of Charlies.

KATE: Martin dear, tell Shane about Leopold.

MARTIN: Oh yes, you see Leopold went to Rome to make his confession. In the course of the confession the priest told Leopold that he had a leg of the very ass on which Christ rode into Jerusalem. It had been preserved over the centuries and was wrapped in fine silk. The priest said that he could offer it to Leopold as a devotional aid. Of course it was very costly. But he said that he had to remember that the Lord's own legs had rubbed against that ass's leg, as our Lord rode into Jerusalem. Now Leopold was very interested and, being a wealthy merchant, he said that money was no object. But the priest said that the sale was conditional on Leopold promising, on oath, to keep it a secret. So Leopold vowed on the holy ass's leg, to keep it a secret. "I won't even tell my wife," he said. But when he got back to Germany he went to his usual tavern and met up with four of his drinking friends. He had brought the holy relic with him. Although he had promised, on oath, to keep it a secret, he couldn't resist bragging to his companions what he had brought

back from Rome. At this one of his companions said that he had also been to Rome and had come back with exactly such a relic. It transpired that all four of them had in their possession one of the legs of the very ass on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Leopold was perplexed. It's a miracle, he declared – an ass that had five legs!

SHANE: I've read that you preach that Bible is the supreme authority for our faith. There is in the Holy Scripture a wisdom so profound, that no man may thoroughly study it or comprehend it.

MARTIN: Ay, we must ever remain scholars here; we cannot sound the depth of one single verse in Scripture; we get hold but of the A, B, C, and that imperfectly. Who can so exalt himself as to comprehend this one line of St Peter: 'Rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings.' Here St Peter would have us rejoice in our deepest misery and trouble, like as a child might kiss the rod that is used by his schoolmaster to chastise him..

SHANE: Sir, what do you say to those who take offence at some of the more down-to-earth passages in the Bible. Shouldn't God's word have been entirely on a lofty plane?

MARTIN: I admonish every pious Christian that he should not take offence at the plain, unvarnished manner of speech of the Bible. Let him reflect that

what may seem trivial and vulgar to him, emanates from the high majesty, power, and wisdom of God. The Bible is the book that makes fools of the wise of this world; it is only understood by the plain and simple hearted. Esteem this book as the precious fountain that can never be exhausted. In it you find the swaddling-clothes and the manger where the angels directed the poor, simple shepherds. They seem poor and mean, but dear and precious is the treasure that lies therein.

SHANE: So, how do you know that the Bible is the true word of God?

MARTIN: The Bible is the true word of God I can prove as follows. All things that have been, and are, in the world, and the way in which they were created, are described in the first book of Moses. Countless kings and princes have raged against this book, and tried to destroy it – Alexander the Great, the princes of Egypt and of Babylon, the monarchs of Persia, of Greece, and of Rome, the emperors Julius and Augustus – but they didn't succeed. Now they have all vanished, while the book remains, and will remain forever and ever, perfect and entire, as it was at the first. And who has protected the Bible against such powerful forces? No one, surely, except God himself. And it is no small miracle how God has for so long preserved and protected this book, for the devil and the world are its enemies. I believe that the devil has destroyed many good books of the church as, in

times past, he killed and crushed many holy persons. While the Romish church stood, the Bible was never given to the people in such a form that they could clearly read and understand it, as they now can in the German translation, which, thank God, we have prepared here at Wittenberg.

SHANE: So if the priests should no longer be the ones to explain the Bible to the people, this places the burden on those who write Biblical commentaries.

MARTIN: In all areas of learning, the ablest professors are those who thoroughly know their books. When I was young, I read the Bible over and over and over again, and I knew it so well that, in a moment, I could have located any verse that might be referred to. I then read the commentators, but I soon threw them aside because I found in them so many things my conscience could not approve of, as being contrary to the sacred text. It is always better to see with one's own eyes than with those others.

SHANE: Which do you find the more difficult language from which to translate – The Hebrew Old Testament or the Greek of the New Testament?

MARTIN: Without doubt, Hebrew is the more difficult. The words of the Hebrew tongue have a peculiar energy. It is impossible to convey so much so briefly in any other language. To render them

intelligibly, we must not attempt to give word for word, but only aim at the sense and idea. In translating Moses, I made it my effort to avoid Hebraism – it was a difficult business. The wise scholars, who pretend to have greater knowledge than myself on the subject, criticise me for a word here or there. But if they had attempted the labour I have accomplished, I would find a thousand mistakes in their translations for every one in mine.

SHANE: I have another question for you. Since God knew that man would not continue in the state of innocence, why did he create him at all?

MARTIN: (*laughing*) The Lord, all-powerful and magnificent, saw that he should need in his house, sewers and cesspools; be assured he knows quite well what he is about. Even unclean things have their uses. God can make use of the most imperfect of his creatures if he chooses to. Let us keep clear of these abstract questions, and consider the will of God such as it has been revealed unto us.

SHANE: Now sir, I have often been asked why God seems to have made use of so many sinful men. He seems to have gone out of his way to choose flawed men, and made them into heroes.

MARTIN: God is upright, faithful, and true. He has shown this, not only in his promises, through Christ, of forgiveness of sins, but also, in that he has given

us, in the Scriptures, many gracious and comforting examples of great and holy saints who of God were highly enlightened and favoured, and who, nevertheless fell into great sin. Adam, by his disobedience, left a legacy of sin and death on all his descendents. David also fell very heavily. Jonah was very upset that Nineveh was not destroyed. Peter denied Christ and, before his conversion, Paul persecuted Christ's followers. These, and many other such examples the Bible describes. Not that we should purposely sin, relying on the mercy of God, but that, when we feel his anger, we should not despair. We may also see by such examples of great holy men falling so badly grievously, what a wicked, crafty, and envious spirit is the devil. God allowed these Godly people, who committed such serious sins, so that they should not be proud or boast themselves of their own gifts and qualities.

SHANE: Is reason to hold no authority at all with Christians, since it is to be set aside in matters of faith?

MARTIN: Before faith and the knowledge of God, reason is mere darkness; but in the hands of those who believe, it is an excellent instrument. All facilities and gifts are pernicious, exercised by the impious; but most salutary when possessed by godly persons.

KATE: Martin dear, I heard your cousin preach this afternoon in the parish church and I understood him better than Dr. Palmer, even though the Doctor is held to be a very excellent preacher.

MARTIN: John Palmer preaches as you women like to talk – whatever comes into your minds, you speak. A preacher ought to remain by the text, and deliver that which he has before him, to the end people may well understand it. But a preacher that will speak everything that comes in his mind, is like a maid that goes to market, and meeting another maid, makes a stand, and they hold together a goods-market.

SHANE: I understand that you consider the popes to be the enemy of the people. We have, at the moment, a very kind and wise pope.

MARTIN: Praise God if the future popes will no longer be servants of Satan as they are in my day, though if I had my way there would no longer be popes. I speak only of what I find. Kings and princes coin money only out of metals, but the pope coins money out of everything – indulgences, ceremonies, dispensations, pardons; it is all fish that comes in to his net. Only baptism escapes him, for children come into the world without clothes to be stolen, or teeth to be drawn.

KATE: Yes, when Wolsey, who was a butcher's son, was made cardinal, a merry fellow said, "I hope

he becomes pope one day, for then we shall have meat on fast days. After all St Peter, because he was a fisherman, prohibited meat, just in order to raise the price of fish.” But it is not only the pope who sucks all the wealth from the people. Even monks will drain what little the poor have in order to stuff it into their own pockets. Martin, you must tell our friend the amusing story of the death of Ambrose.

MARTIN: Ha, ha. Yes, an acquaintance of mine, Ambrose by name, was at the point of death when a monk from the nearest monastery came to see what he could pick up. He said to poor Ambrose “Sir, will you give a thousand crowns to our monastery when you go to glory?” The dying man, unable to speak, replied by a nod of the head. Whereupon the monk, turning to the gentleman’s son, said “you see, your father makes us this bequest.” The son said to the father, “father, is it your pleasure that I kick this monk down stairs?” The dying man nodded as before, and the son forthwith drove the monk out of doors.

SHANE: Can I ask what you think eternal life will be like?

MARTIN: No, you can’t ask me that! It’s a deep mystery. When I lay sucking at my mother’s breast, I had no notion how I should afterwards eat, drink, or live. In the same way, we on earth have no idea what the life to come will be like.

KATE: My husband is particularly eloquent on the subject of the majesty of God.

MARTIN: All the works of God are unsearchable and unspeakable, and no human intellect can understand them. Only faith can take hold of them without the power of human reasoning. No mortal creature can comprehend God in his majesty, and therefore he came among us in the simplest manner, and was made man. In all things, in the least of his creatures, God's almighty power and wonderful works clearly shine. For what man, no matter how powerful, wise and holy, can make a fig-tree out of a single fig, or a cherry-tree out of one cherry-stone, without God's intervention? Nor can we understand how the eye sees, or how intelligible words are spoken plainly, when only the tongue moves in the mouth. How then should we be able to understand the secrets of God's majesty, or comprehend them with our human sense, reason, or understanding. Should we then admire our own wisdom? I, for my part, admit I am a fool.

SHANE: Forgive me if I ask your wife what she uses on her skin – she has a wonderful complexion. Back in America we have things called cosmetics that remove wrinkles and nourish the skin, but here

...

KATE: I rub my skin with cow dung every morning. I leave it on for five minutes and then wash it off with cold water.

SHANE: Holy crap! Oh ... sorry!

MARTIN: It's wonderful how God has put such excellent physic into mere muck. We know by experience that swine's dung stints the blood; horse manure serves for the pleurisy; man's excrement heals wounds and black blotches and that of asses is used for the bloody flux, while cow dung is good for epilepsy, or for convulsions of children.

SHANE: I'm not sure that these would be very popular back in Australia. But it does show that God gives us many blessings through the animals that he has created. But why did he create the dangerous wild animals? What purpose does a lion serve to humanity?

MARTIN: Although, because of original sin, many wild beasts hurt mankind, such as lions, wolves, bears, snakes, adders, and so on, yet the merciful God has in such manner mitigated our well-deserved punishments, that there are many more beasts that serve us for our good and profit, than of those which do us hurt. There are many more sheep than wolves, more oxen than lions, lots more cows than bears, more deer than foxes, more lobsters than there are

scorpions. In all creatures there are more good than evil, more benefits than hurts and hindrances.

SHANE: I'll think about that next time I see a red-bellied snake, or a funnelweb spider, or a cockroach.

SHANE: I believe that your emperor Charles has protected the church and the monasteries – not like Henry the eighth of England who has taken over the monasteries there.

KATE: The emperor Charles was good in that way, but he has now begun to dissolve the monasteries just like his fellow princes in other lands. Martin preached against his actions and, in so doing, he made up a delightful story to illustrate the point. Tell our guest about the tale of the dog at Linz.

MARTIN: Ah, yes, I saw a dog, at Linz in Austria, that was taught the trick of going to the butcher's shop to buy meat for his master, pushing a small hand cart. On his return he was surrounded by several other dogs who tried to take the meat out of the cart. This clever dog fought strenuously with them. But when he saw they were too strong for him, he grabbed a piece of meat and ate it himself, before all the meat was taken by the other dogs. Our emperor Charles does the same thing. After having protected spiritual benefices for many years, he has seen that every other prince in Europe has taken

possession of the monasteries and so he too has seized upon those monasteries within his reach.

SHANE: I have always understood that you're a great story teller. Do you have one more story for my readers?

MARTIN: OK. Here's another merry story that will prepare our stomachs for the meal. A rich merchant, on his death bed, ordered that his remains should be carried to Ratisbon. His friends, knowing that the transport of a corpse incurred a heavy toll, decided to pack the carcass in a barrel of wine, which they then forwarded as ordinary freight. The wagoners, not knowing what was in the barrel, decided to tap into the barrel, and swilled away right joyously, until they found out they had been drinking a pickled corpse!

SHANE: I don't think that this story has left me with a settled stomach. If we have wine with the food I won't be able to forget that story.

KATE: Well, to accompany the food I can offer you some full-bodied Rhenish wine. But I can assure you that when I say 'full-bodied' I don't mean that it has been transported in a barrel along with a corpse!