

"contending earnestly for the faith ..." Jude :3

reflections

The end of 2004 is nearly upon us. Only a few more days and we will be 'out of the old and into the new'. For some of us, the end of the year signifies the end of school life, for others that another year at uni has passed and for those in the workforce it means a week or so off work and then a continuation of working life.

But regardless of our situation in life, the end of the year is still of significance. It's a natural time to sit back and reflect on the year just gone.

Was I successful at what I did this year - my exams, my job? More importantly, did I do my best while studying and working - do my best because God has commanded me to develop my talents? Did I develop friendships with those who assist in the building up of my faith and love for God? Did I draw in those who were struggling and who rarely had a friend to talk to? What did I do for the furtherance of God's Kingdom this year? Was my club attendance out of selfish, social motivation, or did I go to study God's Word and therefore prepare myself sufficiently before club? Did I attend church every Sunday willingly, or grudgingly, knowing that's what my parents expected of me? Did I contribute to the communion of Saints? Did I tell my uni friends why I don't believe in evolution? Did I tell my workmates why I didn't want to go down to the pub on the Friday afternoon? Was God pleased with, not my attempt to all these things out of my own strength, but with my reliance on Him for everything that I did - in every day of 2004?

2005 promises to be a busy year - they always are. What will your focus be? Think about it! Spend some time reflecting, before you are once again swept into the busyness of everyday life. Reflect on what God has done for you. So long as we spend time doing this all these other things will happen automatically - out of thankfulness for what God does for us each day again.

May we all continue to seek God in 2005.

"Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, **as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue...**" (2 Peter 1: 2-3)

Rose Vermeulen

Aim:

Romans 12:2 teaches all of God's people: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

This magazine will encourage its readers to earnestly contend for the faith, and to think and act biblically, in the good traditions of the Church of all ages. Its basis is God's word, as the Church confesses in the Three Forms of Unity. It is intended for the younger members of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, and is produced in co-operation with the Una Sancta. Subscription to the Contender is automatic with subscription to the Una Sancta.

It is not meant to be exclusively for unmarried members who still attend the Youth Bible Study Clubs, but for all those who fit within the loose parameters of 16 to 30 years of age.

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in this edition

reflections - editorial 04 - 05	
Rose Vermeulen	1
redemptive significance	
Bruce Huizinga	2
on a mission west timor	
Lisa Deman	3
abortion	
Rose Vermeulen	5
church history & islamic rage	
Laurence van der Plas	8
defend the faith	
Emma Tomren	10

... and more

food for thought

While playing beach volleyball the other day under a huge banner proclaiming 'Defend the Faith', I was disturbed to here the song "Losing my religion". Ironic, don't you think?

Bert Veldman

defend the faith

What was it all about?

Friday the first of October marked the beginning of the Rockingham Youth Conference 2004. This was a weekend shared by youth of all the West Australian Free Reformed Churches with the aim of better equipping us to defend the faith. The weekend involved a number of interactive workshops as well as a variety of games and activities.

Friday Night

It all began at the Rockingham Free Reformed Church where we all arrived to register for the weekend. After the members of the conference committee had introduced themselves, Leon Brouwer, the speaker for the evening's workshop, launched into the topic of media watch. The workshop consisted of a short paper, watching a series of advertisements and group discussions focussing on the underlying messages of the advertisements. Our attention was brought to the methods used by media to sell and promote different products and services, and how we, as Christians, should be wary of such advertising.

Saturday

The promise of a big breakfast saw many bleary-eyed congress-goers arriving back at Rockingham church at 7:30 am on Saturday morning. Breakfast consisted of a huge variety of food including bacon, eggs, pancakes, fruit and yoghurt, ensuring that no one went hungry and we were all well prepared for the morning's workshop.

The topic for the morning was apologetics, that is "the defending of the Christian faith against

those who raise objections to its validity", with Alf Woonings facilitating the workshop. The morning included a presentation as well as whole group and small group discussions ensuring everyone's participation. 1 Peter 3: 15 which reads "... always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you..." was used as the basis of the presentation. The workshop focused on how we can prepare ourselves to defend the faith: what we need to know and what we need to use. The main points covered in the workshop are summarised as follows:

Who are we?

- Citizens of another world (heaven)
- Ambassadors of this other world, and
- Soldiers fighting for this other world

Where are we?

- In a foreign land (the world)
- On a battlefield
- On our way home (to heaven)

Who and what are we attacking? Who are we defending ourselves against?

- The devil (Father of lies)
- The world
- Our own sinful flesh

on a mission west timor

On a mission this issue takes us to the poor Indonesian province of West Timor. There the Rev. Edwar Dethan and his wife Femmy are ministering at a Mission Post in the rural village of Taros. Himself a West Timorese, Rev. Dethan was sent by the Church of Smithville in Canada to work back among his people after completing his studies at our Theological College in Hamilton. Lisa Deman writes about her experiences with the Dethans in West Timor, giving us an idea of how the Church is being gathered also in that corner of the World.

was a lot of support for the work in West Timor in the amount of money raised. With it we could buy medications, first aid supplies and use the rest when we got to Timor (for Bibles, song books, photocopying of Psalm books and Doctor's visits).

We arrived in Timor via Bali on Sunday, 3rd of October. We knew this would be a whole new experience as soon as we took off. It felt like the wings would fall off the plane. But we made it and were welcomed by a swarm of smiling Indonesian faces and a van to lug all our loaded bags to Ed and Femmy's house. We had our own room but realised their house was very packed with their own 2 children and 4 other older children who live with them since they have nowhere else to live. These children also help around the house though, so it is useful for the Dethan family.

We very quickly found out that the Dethans are constantly busy with meetings and random visitors who often seek Ed's advice and help, expecting answers for everything because he is a minister.

That same afternoon we attended Bible Study and were asked to help a few people who were very sick. Diagnosing and healing tropical diseases is not one of my competencies, but we were able to recognise

the severity of some of the health problems and decided that seeing a Doctor would be a good option. Throughout our trip, nearly every day, people were asking for help with an ailment of some kind. This was partly because we were seen as important, being white and maybe there was also a miscommunication about my 'nursing' skills. We took a number of people to a Doctor and bought appropriate medications for Malaria, Thyroid disorders, Scabies and malnourishment. The Doctor that we saw realised that this was only a small portion of the people suffering from different diseases in the village where we were. She was very helpful and said she could come to the village once a month and treat people who needed it for \$1 per person. This would be much more effective than taking a group of people and travelling the half hour from the village. Plus, the people in the village are often scared of going into the city of Kupang to the Doctor and most often can't afford it.

Rev. Edwar Dethan is sponsored by the Church of Smithville in Canada to work at the Mission Post in Taros. He holds a service every Sunday morning at 7.30am in a room of one of the homes of a member of the Mission Post. When they first started the Mission Post 9 months ago they had 5-8 people attending and now they have between 30-50 people every Sunday morning. It's amazing to see God's Church being gathered and blessed there. The sermon is



It all started when my good friend and I were playing a game of Risk in a Canadian basement on a snowy Sunday with Rev. Edwar and Femmy Dethan...

Rev. Dethan had almost completed his studies at the Theological College during the time I was in Canada in 2003. He was great value- for laughs, wisdom, chats, volleyball, inspiration and of course Risk. So there was good reason to visit their humble home and it was then that jokes went around that perhaps my friend and I would come visit Ed and his wife Femmy when they moved back to Timor.

Anyway, as time ticks on, my friend did go over to West Timor where she gave some health talks and worked at a school as part of a project from Canada. Great ideas came of her trip when she returned to Canada and there are now plans to do more to help out the Timorese with health problems.

In October this year my Mum and I decided that we too would go visit Ed and Femmy in West Timor (more so out of curiosity and to fulfil my joke that I would visit). Ed was also keen to arrange some more health seminars since I am currently studying nursing. To make the trip as useful as possible in the short time we had, we raised money within the Albany congregation. We were blessed to see that there

very basic, so we're told (our Indonesian isn't so impressive), and is in the same format as our services. After the service Ed takes 8-10 adults to another house and he teaches them catechism and Femmy takes the children for Sunday school. She reads them a bible story and they do lots of singing.

On Sunday, after attending the service at Rev. Dethan's Mission Post it was about 11am and we went with him on to another Mission Post that is about 1 hour away. Here Ed is assisted by Rev. Petrus from a nearby Church who knows everybody at the mission post very well. There are not as many people at this Mission Post but they are just as keen to listen to the gospel. We had a delicious lunch there prepared by the ladies, always complete with a bucket of rice.

After this we went home for our afternoon nap, as we had to be back in Taros by 6.30pm for Bible Study. About 20-30 adults and young people turned up and piled in (and out) the house by candlelight for most of the night due to a power failure (a common occurrence). The young adults had an exercise book and had to take notes and at the end Ed checks to see if they understand the discussion. The older people have some very lively discussions Ed told us later. They like to apply everything to their practical life. Ed interpreted the discussions so we could join in and it was interesting to participate in discussions about the use of our money and tithes. No matter how much or little money we have or where we live there are always struggles as to how we use our money and our talents.

During the week Femmy has bible study with the women, which is also well attended and one evening they have kids club where the children listen to a story, fill in a sheet with questions and ... more singing!

Mum and I had the great pleasure of touring different places around West Timor, including taking a super long and skinny wooden boat to some small, remote islands. We drove through the mountains for a few hours looking at different places and seeing different styles of huts and living conditions. A hospital tour was also very interesting. It was very basic and divided into different classes, depending on how much money you have to spend. The family of a patient all stay by the person in hospital too so it's a very crowded place.

So much can be done in West Timor. Ed and I were discussing the different possibilities in terms of future support. The Mission Post is continuing to grow and they are already spilling out the doors to listen to the sermon. A building will eventually be needed to hold services and other meetings.

Ed and Femmy also plan to build a new house in the near future and to possibly add an orphanage onto the house so their own family can have their own space. Support may be needed to build and support an orphanage and to take in new children.

I did a health talk for the people there and realised the most basic health and hygiene information is so beneficial to them. I hope to continue with the health work and to make pamphlets in Indonesian and provide basic health advice to the people in the village.

Bibles are also always in such demand. We were able to buy some from the bookshop in Kupang and sell them to the people for a very small price. Selling them is important so that the people feel that they are responsible with their money. We were surprised to see how eager people were to have their own Bible. Hopefully we can continue to help in providing them with the Word of God.

There are ideas in the making to have small groups visit every year to support with projects and especially to show spiritual support. Ed says that it would be very beneficial for the youth there to interact with the youth from Australia- to hear about issues we struggle with and to show them that we have many struggles too.



While Ed speaks about people benefiting so much from us, I know that we would learn a great deal from our fellow Christians in West Timor. I know I have learnt so much in just 10 days. It's beautiful to see such a thriving on the Word of God, to see constant contentment with so little. I wonder if sometimes I have way too much than I know what to do with.

There are many exciting plans for the future. Right now we are evaluating how much support is being provided by Smithville Church and where our support would be necessary and most beneficial. Perhaps small youth trips may also be on the agenda sooner or later but we'll continue to investigate the details on that too. You will hear more on how we can specifically help so if you're interested- keep it that way.

For now we continue on in prayer for the work done and the people at the Mission Posts, for guidance and understanding in supporting them from Australia, for the gathering, defending and preserving of Christ's Church.

Lisa Deman

Hungary. The Roman Catholic papacy did not have the time to fight Martin Luther and John Calvin to the extent that they could have because they were distracted by the Muslim incursions in their realm.

Slowly, however, the tide began to turn against the Muslim expansion. While Islam spread to India and Southeast Asia (including Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula and the Philippines) the West began to gain the upper hand. The British Empire grew and conquered India. Together with the Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese, the English also colonised many Southeast Asian countries. In 1917 British and Australian troops recaptured Jerusalem, and in 1922 - after the First World War - the League of Nations divided the Ottoman Empire between England, France and Italy.

It is precisely these events that motivate many of today's militant Muslims. For them, the recapture of Muslim lands by 'Christian' nations is the ultimate humiliation. In October 2001, after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, Osama bin Laden said "what America is tasting now is something insignificant compared to what we have tasted for scores of years. Our nation [the Muslim world] has been tasting this humiliation and this degradation for more than 80 years". This is a direct reference to the defeat of the Ottoman empire following the end of World War One in 1918, and it is the motivation for much of the bombing and bloodshed carried out today in the name of Allah. Sadly, these acts of violence are consistent with a theology in which Allah is a god who insists only on submission.

Our Christian Response

As Christians we must not respond to Islamic militancy by being antagonistic towards Muslims. While the government does indeed "bear the sword to prevent murder", and may justly use force to protect its citizens, Muslims primarily need to have their faulty thinking about God set straight. Our Christian response is to show kindness and love towards Muslims, as we must to all unbelievers. We must show that Allah is not the God who lives in Heaven by demonstrating in our words and actions that God is a merciful and compassionate God.

In this regard, Mission work is very important, not just to the Muslim world but also to our own Western society. The Western world also needs to repent from its wickedness, and return to serving God in a true and obedient manner. The Gospel of Jesus Christ needs to go out to all people!

We too, must accompany that Gospel with deeds. We must not try, as the crusades did, to wrongly advance God's name through hatred and bloodshed. Rather, we must spell out in our actions what mercy and compassion really is: Jesus Christ gave up his life for us when we were still dead in sin! Our God has smothered us in kindness, and we must do the same to others. That way, contacts between Christianity and Islam will be positive!

Questions

Following the speech there was opportunity for questions and discussion. Some of the questions, and Rev Bouwman's responses, included:

"What role should mission work play? This requires much wisdom, as mission workers in many Middle East countries have an average life expectancy of less than two months. Technology allows the gospel to be brought from a distance, with the Middle East Reformed Fellowship (MERF) using radio transmitters based in Cyprus to broadcast messages. Wisdom is also required in our personal witness to Muslims. There is a time and place for everything, and we must not straight away criticise Mohammed or the Koran if we are to win our Muslim neighbours for Christ. Instead, we must share the comfort that we ourselves have. The way in which we conduct ourselves is also very important because many Muslims have a false understanding of Christianity, equating it with Hollywood-style worldliness.

"Many Muslims have stated that Islam is a peace-loving religion. Is Islam in general a threat, or just the radical/orthodox branches? Islam is by no means a united religion, and not every Muslim embraces violence. There are two main groups in Islam, a Sunni majority and a Shia minority, who disagree on doctrinal points of Islam. For instance, some interpret jihad (holy war) as a physical war against non-Muslim infidels, whilst others see it as a personal struggle against sin. The Koran repeatedly contradicts itself, so Muslims believe in 'abrogation', which means that later revelations in the Koran nullify earlier ones. However, Islamic scholars disagree on the order of the Koran's 112 chapters, since they were arranged by length, not chronological order. However, when Mohammed's own actions are considered, it becomes clear that violence is implicit in an orthodox interpretation of 'Allah is God.' In contrast, the Bible has a spirit inspired authorship spanning about 1500 years, and has a uniform message. An 'orthodox' interpretation of the Bible and the life of Jesus leads to a very different conclusion!

"How should we respond to the spread of Islam? There is no need to fear Islam, since we know from John 16:33 that we can be at peace because God has overcome the world. However, we must recognise that we are in a spiritual war and we need to fight it with spiritual weapons; the gospel must go out. Under the influence of postmodernism, which teaches that there are no absolute truths, our society has seen an increase in religious pluralism and moral decadence. We must be aware of postmodernism's bankruptcy, because there are absolute truths which are so dear that martyrs have died for them. In this sense we can also learn from Muslims, because they are not afraid to hold strong convictions

Recommended Reading

Rev Bouwman recommended the books Christians, Muslims and Islamic Rage by Christopher Catherwood, Islam in Conflict by Peter Redell and Peter Cotterall, and Stuart Robinson's Mosques & Miracles: Revealing Islam and God's Grace to those wishing to study the topic further. For a discussion re Islam's doctrine: Answering Islam: the Crescent in the Light of the Cross by Norman Geisler & Abdul Saleeb

Further information on the Middle East Reformed Fellowship can be found on the Internet at www.merf.org

Laurence Van der Plas

church history and islamic rage

a spysc meeting report

On the evening of the 19th of October about 20 people, mainly youth, met at the John Calvin Christian College for a SPYSC meeting. The guest speaker, Rev C Bouwman, introduced the topic 'Church history and Islamic rage: why the anger and what's the answer'. In his paper he gave a historical overview of Islam, examining the significance of points of contact in history between Islam and Christianity. Rev Bouwman also gave some suggestions about Christian conduct towards Muslims. What follows is a summary of his speech.

Historical interactions between Christianity and Islam

Violent points of contact between Christianity and Islam can be traced back to as early as the eighth century. In the Battle of Tours in 732, Charles Martel successfully defended Europe from Muslim invaders who had come through northern Africa and entered southern France. During the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, the Roman Catholic Church led a number of crusades to Palestine in a violent effort to liberate Jews from Muslim control. Even during the 16th century, at about the same time as the Reformation, Muslims tried to attack Europe from the east. While they successfully captured Hungary at the battle of Mohacs in 1526, further expansion into Vienna was unsuccessful. Even in the 20th century, the ANZACS fought against Muslim Turks at Gallipoli.

But interactions between Christians and Arabs (who later became Muslim) can be found even further back in history. At Pentecost, Arabs were amongst those speaking in tongues (Acts 2:11). Christ gave the command to make disciples of all nations, and we know from Galatians 1:17 that Paul also journeyed to Arabia to spread the gospel.

In fact, the Christian influence in the area now called the Middle East was strongest when the early Church was under intense persecution. As believers fled, they took the gospel with them to the east (including what is now Iran and Iraq) and South (to Yemen and Egypt). However, the persecution began to subside in 325 as the emperor Constantine came to power. The absence of persecution gave rise to a process of merging, as Christianity in some areas was slowly watered down and combined with local heathen beliefs. This hybrid mix of religion resulted in general godlessness, and a lack of such basic tenets of the Christian faith as caring for the poor. It was in this environment of heathendom with a Christian veneer that Mohammed, the founder of Islam, grew up.

Development of Islam

Mohammed was born in Mecca in approximately 570. Orphaned at the age of six, he experienced first hand the lack of care shown by the hybrid religions in his area. Working as a trader for a woman named Kadijah, who he later married, Mohammed travelled north and encountered Christians who believed in one God. Mohammed responded

to his environment and what he'd learnt from abroad by creating a religion that included some ideas from Christianity and addressed the problems he saw around him.

The basis for his new religion, Islam, rested on a series of revelations, allegedly from the angel Gabriel, which are recorded in the Koran, Islam's holy book. The Koran contains some overlap with the Old Testament, but it is factually inaccurate in many places as a result of Mohammed's illiteracy and his poor understanding of the Old Testament. Mary, for instance, is recorded in the Koran as the sister of Moses and Aaron! Despite God's instructions concerning the completeness of scripture, Mohammed began to preach a new religion. In doing so he distorted the attributes of both God and Jesus, and erased the gospel of free grace.

Rather than speaking of God as a God of mercy, Mohammed emphasised Allah as a god of power. In clear defiance of Galatians 1:8, where we read "but even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed", Mohammed taught that Jesus did not die on the cross and pay for sin. Mohammed blasphemously asserted that Jesus came merely as a prophet, and that he himself (i.e., Mohammed) was the last prophet, with his words being above those of Jesus Christ.

Islam (meaning 'to submit') began to spread rapidly, but not through the preaching of the word. Instead, Mohammed achieved submission through compulsion and the sword. The Muslim faith spread from Medina to Mecca and in 634, two years after Mohammed's death, the city of Damascus fell. Jerusalem fell in 638, and Islam continued its westward expansion. In 711 militant Muslims crossed the Strait of Gibraltar into Spain. Islam also spread east into what is now Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. By 732, only 100 years after Mohammed's death, a virtual empire had been established from the Atlantic to Afghanistan, with one language, one culture and one religion.

Between 750 and 1200 there was little territorial expansion. Instead, there was cultural change, as the conquered Muslim territories were 'Arabised' in culture, art and philosophy. While Europe was asleep in the Dark Ages, science and medicine was increasing in the Arab world. The Roman Catholic papacy responded to the Muslim expansion by launching crusades from the 11th to the 13th century. Not only were the crusades failures, but they were damaging points of contact between Christianity and Islam because they painted a false picture of the gospel. After 1200, Islamic expansion continued as the Mongols adopted Islam in central Asia. In 1453 Constantinople (now Istanbul), fell to the Turks and became the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

Islamic expansion in the 16th century actually proved to be a blessing in some ways for the Church of Jesus Christ. The Ottomans, who dominated Turkey, crossed the Dardanelles and captured Greece, Macedonia and

on abortion

"Sissors are inserted through the skull to open the way for a high-powered suction tube that sucks the brain, allowing the skull to be crushed..."

Sounds like a line from a horror story doesn't it. Well, it isn't. This is modern day Australia, a daily occurrence, and one that modern women call 'my choice'.

Abortion. It's real, it's happening. We realize that don't we? Or have we fallen asleep to the atrocity that it really is?

A lady that featured in 'The Australian' recently, admitted to having a late term abortion. She planted an oak sapling in honour of the unborn child and asked for the child's remains for a formal burial. She had consented to the murder of this child and her remorse led her to do some superficial acts to compensate for the guilt feeling. This is one story amongst the thousands that would have a story to tell.

The terrible reality rightly fills us with horror. It makes us angry. Think about how you felt when you were awaiting the arrival of your brother, or that little niece - how much excitement it caused - how many prayers were offered up at the time of delivery, and prayers of thanks when all went well. Think of the emotions you would have gone through if this special child was treated as described in the opening paragraph. It would fill you with gut-wrenching sadness and horror. Perhaps, rather than uncomfortably squelching those emotions we should think clearly and rationalize them. Think about how God feels about the murder of the children he created: "For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb" (Ps 139:13).

So, do we continue to sit back, shrug our shoulders, or pretend we don't know anything about it?

Back in 1998 when it was going before WA Parliament we fought it - we wrote letters, we prayed, we signed petitions. Unfortunately it still passed. We lost the war. Or did we? We lost a battle. The war is still on!!

And daily doctors and nurses and men and women wage war against the innocent unborn. They commit murder for their daily living - they call it de-selection, or 'a responsible decision'. In one ward of the hospital they fight to save premature babies, and

in the next ward they are killing babies of the same age because their mother couldn't afford to keep them, or because their dad isn't ready to settle down and become a parent.

'The innocent unborn have nobody else barracking for them - even their own parents have condemned them to death. Let us obey God, the Creator of life, and protect life in every way we can.'

But like Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson says, we are losing fellow Australians - thousands a year. More importantly we are losing those whom God created. They miss out on the opportunity of hearing about Christ's salvation offered to those who believe.

So, what have we done? Have we thrown our hands up in despair and said 'oh well, too late now, the law has passed'? It's not too late! God has forbidden murder in His Word. Moreover "the government bears the sword to prevent murder" (LD 40, Q & A 105). But since the carnage continues God calls us to call the government to account. After all, we live in a democratic society, where we can have a say.

At present there is much in the media about abortions. It has been suggested that the abortion debate may define John Howard's fourth term, just as the euthanasia debate defined his second term. Our health minister Tony Abbott and Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson are keen to bring this issue to the fore. We need to grab this opportunity with both hands while it is being well covered by the media and in the eye of the public. Let our Christian voice be heard. Write letters to the Editor, or to your local members, speak on talk-back shows, pray for those politicians bold enough to bring up this issue, and for those not bold enough to stand up against what they know to be murder.

The innocent unborn have nobody else barracking for them - even their own parents have condemned them to death. Let us obey God, the Creator of life, and protect life in every way we can.

Rose Vermeulen

thriving in a drought season

Now that the warmer weather has returned to Perth, our precious and limited supply of water again must be protected. Therefore the two day-a-week water restrictions are again being enforced, so that our precious source of life can be protected. In this way our plant life will continue to survive over the summer and dry months of the year. Then, hopefully, come winter and the rain season with it, the plants will receive the source of life that they need in order to thrive, and bear good fruit and flowers.

Sometimes our life of faith can be like this as well. When we have problems we call upon God to rejuvenate us, and our spiritual life is revived. However, are we just surviving in this world, or are we thriving? Do we show in our life every day that we belong to God, and bear the fruits of the spirit each day again?

Our faith should not be a separate part of our identity, and it should not be used as a last resort. A tree that is watered only when it looks like it is dying may survive, but it will not thrive.

God promised that the man who trusts in Him "will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:8).

'A tree that is watered only when it looks like it is dying may survive, but it will not thrive.'

God has planted us by the stream of living water, which never runs dry. No matter what happens, the stream will always sustain us, and give us the life that we need to live in this world. The sustenance that He gives us is the precious gift of His Word. How often do we actually sit down, read God's Word and meditate on it? Also the gift of the preaching of the Word, we should make sure that we don't just listen to the sermon on Sunday and neglect to work with the sermon throughout the week. We can also receive the

blessings of the living water by attending bible study club, reading different church magazines etc. All these blessings may help us decide if we just survive in this world or if we will thrive.

God has established His covenant with us by planting us near the source of all life. God gives us His Word, and the covenant promises which are contained within them. We therefore now have an obligation to respond to this covenant by obeying what God says in His Word. Then, as God says, 'the righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon.' We need to pray that God will help us to keep our promises made at our confession, for it is only through grace that we are able to keep these promises. Problems arise when people begin to think that they can survive on their own strength, and somehow become attracted to the desert of the world. The roots planted by the stream of water begin to direct themselves to the empty happiness of the world.

We know that a tree that stems from the empty and meaningless pleasures of this world cannot flourish. It will wither and die. This may not be evident in this life; doesn't it often seem that the people who shrug off God's requirements in their lives have more fun, are more popular, and are more successful? But we know from the Bible that this is misleading. If we are not obedient to God's demands, if we do not walk in His ways, we will be cursed and our roots will wither. We must bear the fruits of faith, otherwise we will be like the fig tree which bore no fruit and was therefore cursed by Jesus. Later, the disciples 'saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter... said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

However, we have been blessed because we have been planted near the water. We know that even when we are surrounded by desolation, God will keep His promises, and so if we want to serve Him, we will remain green and bear fruit. Others will look with wonder at the tree in full bloom in the middle of what looks like dried-up, barren ground. They will ask, 'Where is its water source?' The source is what it's all about.

Jeanette Janssen

it serves you wrong

He laughed the first time he read the story. The second time he struggled to smile. It was a ridiculous story, the plot farfetched. No wonder it was meant for kids.

The story's called "The Whipping Boy". It's about an English rat catcher's son living in the city's sewers. He's happy. Well, until the day he gets appointed to be the child who gets beaten each time the crown prince misbehaves. He is the Whipping Boy. The boy who gets whipped for the prince's naughtiness.

A ridiculous story. As if something like this could really have happened.

Imagine an even sillier story. Imagine picking up a book and reading the tale of the prince who gets punished for the misdemeanours of a rat catcher's son. Picture the plot: the prince gets whipped for the peasant's naughtiness.

It's a daft concept. It goes against human nature. No one suffers for those of lower importance; one certainly won't suffer for someone who deserves what's coming. "In fact," it's said, "it serves him right."

Isn't hard to work out where I'm going with this train of thought, is it? It's Christmas time. And everyone (nearly) is remembering Jesus. But how?

I'm sure at some point you will have taken a walk through a shopping centre and you'll have seen the nativity scenes. There's Joseph, the proud father, towards the back. A loving Mary sits alongside a gorgeous cot (the decorated manger) and a cute little baby lies there, either with a cherubic smile of contentment or else sound asleep. Either way, he is blissfully unaware of the treasures brought by the three(!) wise men standing by with big smiles on their faces. Some straw is strategically placed to demonstrate the comfort these folk are experiencing. At times a goat is placed nearby, also wearing a smile. It's a nice picture, one of domestic happiness. It reminds us again that it is Christmas, and all is well.

I feel very uncomfortable with those scenes. Why?

I read Luke 2:7 "...and she laid Him in a manger because there was no room..."
I read Matt 2:13 "...flee to Egypt...for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."
I read Luke 22 and Matt 24 "...My soul is exceedingly

sorrowful, even unto death..." and "...being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood..."

'Christmas is about a Man, suffering, dying on the cross, being rejected by the King of Kings, so that you and I might be able to look forward to eternal life.'

I read these passages, and many more, and I know that my Lord did not manage to stay in His comfort zone. He came to suffer, and that is what He did. And I'm reminded in the Lord's Supper form that "...from the beginning of His incarnation till the end of His life on earth He bore for us the wrath of God." It hardly conjures up in our minds the picture of a baby, peacefully sleeping...

I'm reminded in that same form that "on the cross He humbled Himself, in body and soul, to the very deepest shame and anguish of hell." It hardly fits the idea that all is well, does it?

And why did He suffer these things? That we might be accepted by God!! Let me put some emphases in this sentence: that we (yes, you and I!!) might be accepted by God. He (the Almighty God) did this FOR US. And that is a big deal. Because the fact that we've been chosen doesn't serve us right at all. It serves us wrong!! But grace is like that, isn't it?

So, what is the story of Christmas about then? Is it about the cute little baby, smiling? No. It's about a man, no, a Man, suffering, dying on the cross, being rejected by the King of Kings, so that you and I might be able to look forward to eternal life.

Knowing this makes the whole tradition of gift giving seem suddenly very superficial, stupid. But it makes the whole celebration of Christmas much richer. And it gives you and me a very good reason to look forward to next year, when we will be able to continue on in the knowledge of what Christ has done for us, what the Prince has done for the pauper.

And so I wish you all a very thanks filled Christmas, and a blessed New Year.

Eric Dekker