**Tony Holden a selection of articles for Loughton Methodist Church – magazine [2008-2019] – one a year - most recent first**

**Daily living 2019**

I’m glad to be writing again for LMC. Firstly, because I have [always] enjoyed writing. Secondly because writing offers ways to reflect and reconsider and work at our own ideas and feelings.

"Take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry [James 1,19].”

Christians are amongst those who take words and texts seriously. The idea of reflecting on our actions is a very creative one. It’s part of what happens in worship, Bible study, fellowship groups. It feeds our actions – our ‘life, mission, community’ as Rev Sue has it [September 2019 issue].

In our own daily lives we cope with all the difficulties and all the marvellous things that happen to humans. And, I guess, most of us add-in all we see and understand through the media. We don’t just watch and hear stories. It isn’t only that we learn about our world 24/7. We also see close-up the disasters and conflicts and wars: and it affects us. It divides us. Sometimes it makes us feel angry or disappointed or helpless.

So – to jump to my values – I’d say a good life is one that is life-affirming, fulfilled, outgoing. How do we get to this? I’d say, in brief: [1] keep going – don’t give up [2] dig deep – try to nourish yourself and those around you [3] be happy – even though much is difficult [4] sustain your love of life – search for grace, compassion and forgiveness.

**Review of John and Grace Vincent ‘Inner City Testament – changing the world from the bottom’ 2018**

From Ashram Press 7 College Court Sheffield S4 7FN [01142 436 688] – cheques to Ashram Press £11.50 including packing and postage [a book of some 100 pages including many personal photos].

This is a book about Christian ministry though it is also about the business of human living in community. At root, or bottom as the subtitle has it, it is about “personal passions and practical projects.”

It is all summed up for me in the words: “My conviction remains that if you dig deep into Christianity and the Gospels you come out with vocation, lifestyle, change and mission with the poor. Equally If you dig deep into social, economic and political questions you come out with the road to radical alternatives, such as Christianity and the Gospels provide.”

Maybe this is more of a recommendation than a review! I say this because I had in my working life as a Methodist Minister long links with the urban parts of this story. This was when I was in East London [1976-1987] and again when I worked for the national Methodist Church as officer for the Methodist Church Mission alongside the Poor Programme and Urban Mission [1987-1999].

It is a double autobiography. John from 1929 and Grace from 1934 to 2017 when she wrote a few days before she died “And so my part of our rich and wonderful life draws to a close.” Of course it is all viewed through their eyes. There are too many people to mention everyone by name – though many are. This is a story about public lives; working full-out for the common good; backed up by a very deep commitment to each other.

It is also an account of an outstanding Methodist Minister and an outstanding lay woman and how they kept seeking “an understanding of Jesus.” John writes of Grace: “she was a Jesus person. She regarded everyone as potential and actual significant actors in human life, as interpreted by Jesus.”

For those of us who worked with John and Grace this is a fine summary of so many initiatives; so much local effort; such brilliant and caring energy. Those who were there will have many good memories.

Those who have read some of John’s 30 books will find the usual style, detail, vigour and insights.

Newcomers will discover, I think, reflections that encourage people to be courageous enough to take risks and engage in committed actions.

At a time of relentless church decline John and Grace and their many partners and friends offered an alternative style of being a Christian church. Of course there were blind-spots; mistakes; hurts – such I suspect occur in every endeavour that has any weight and purpose to it. I found they sought out genuinely radical alternatives to the current religious and cultural mainstreams. They were, in seeking to be ‘disciples of Jesus,’ bringing into being ‘new creations.’

Those many people who have worked to change the Christian church and the world ‘in the direction of Jesus and his Kingdom’ [however variously expressed] are amongst those whose lives are a blessing. John and Grace have certainly been that for me.

**Four key marks of being a Christian 2017**

As often I got into this writing after reading a book. This was a book of interviews to do with religions, faith, and belief. [Note 1]. I realized in reading it that most religions have a description of what it means for example to be a Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or Jain. There are the five pillars of Islam; the five ‘K’s’ of Sikhism and, in my summary, the ‘right wisdom, meditation and action’ of Buddhism [Note2].

So I asked myself, yet again, ‘what is our Christian equivalent?’ The Methodist Church has its own version. Of course choosing such a short list is difficult. But I think that it is an important task. So I am asking: what are the ideas and actions that stand-out as marks of being a Christian? What would you choose?

For me – being a Christian means we -

[1] Live as followers of Jesus. This is to do with our personal serious commitment. It is also to do with how we regard Jesus [for example as saviour, liberator, catalyst, leader, and founder].

[2] Share in the community of a local church. ‘The life together’ takes many forms in our divided Christian churches. This includes tradition, ritual, worship, preaching, the Eucharist, caring, evangelism and a sense of membership in the world church [Note 3]. But our focus is not in being separate but in experiencing community. At best there is Spirit and energy and a sense of gift as each person works at their own commitment within the Church.

[3] Live by our Christian values as the basis for ethical and political actions. These are to do with values such as tolerance, peace, justice, compassion, forgiveness and non-violence not selfishness, tribalism, greed or violence. The way of the Jesus of the Gospels gives special attention to the ‘poor and disadvantaged’ – it is against the powerful oppressing anyone!

[4] Study the Jesus of the Gospels texts. As humans we all work at issues of truth, meaning and purpose. As Christians we especially focus on the Jesus of the Gospels as a source of life-long instruction and inspiration. We work at interpreting these ancient and many layered texts. As religious people much of this is in terms of the word ‘God.’ We all also use traditions and teachings that come to us as current knowledge. We then work the whole of this out in our own daily practice and devotion.

Notes [1] The book started out as a BBC radio series by Joan Bakewell and the book ‘Belief’ [2005] is edited by her. In it she does 20 interviews of ‘famous’. It ‘covers the ground’ of religions and human meaning in a subtle and stimulating way. [2] Here are two descriptions of the religious process: Maurice Wiles: “Most religions have at least a ritual, a social, an ethical and a doctrinal dimension. But these take very different forms and are related to each other in very different ways [‘What is Theology?’ 1976].” Naomi Ozaniec: “Every religion has both an exoteric and esoteric aspect. The exoteric aspect enshrines dogma, belief and creed. The esoteric aspect enshrines spiritual practice, stresses experience [‘Meditation in a Week’ 1993].” [3] Current Methodist Church statements are at http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/what-is-distinctive-about-methodism/the-methodist-quadrilateral and http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/vision-values

**The Christian New Testament letters 2016**

I’ve spent a huge slice of the last 60 years reading and studying the Christian New Testament. Much of it was focussed on teaching about the Jesus of the Gospels. After Easter this year I decided to read the Acts and the Epistles again. Now I ‘panic’ at the task I’ve set myself. To say a lot is easy whilst a brief personal abstract is very difficult. But here I go!

[1] The writers and leaders want to persuade these new Christian communities that their account of Jesus is the right one. They sought to encourage and advise. They do this by their letters, visits and their own conduct under persecution and imprisonment.

[2] The basic argument is that Jesus, through his words and deeds, makes it possible for humans to relate to God in authentic, righteous, and whole ways. This is demonstrated by his life, death, resurrection as kingdom, salvation, grace.

[3] Those who accept this Gospel and story are given many names. One of them is followers of the Way [what I would call ‘the Christ-like way’].

[4] The writings are culturally embodied in their time and place. They are set at the boundary between the Jewish religion and the overlapping new Christian faith and within the wider Graeco-Roman [pagan] world. This Gospel, it is said, is for all who accept it. It is [Paul shouts] for Gentiles and not only for Jews.

[5] The writings are rich and complex in image and metaphor. Some today are difficult and even unfathomable. The writers and leaders contribute details of their own lives and relationships. But also they show their own distinctive emphases [Acts, Paul, Pastoral, Philemon, Hebrews, James, Peter, John, Jude and Revelation].

[6] The letters whirl with ideas that are trying to make sense of the ‘event’ of Jesus and the subsequent interpretations that stretch experience, ideas and values.

[7] They are full of disputes. These are as much to do with ‘authority’ as with ‘false teaching’ or ‘bad behaviour.’ Some of the true teaching turns on an expectation that the world is to end soon. Some are impatient and imaginatively vivid about the expected End-time.

[9] But the centre of this varied witness is that Jesus was a catalyst who made life-changing decisions possible. Indeed the argument is that Jesus not only changes life but also life after death. Those who ‘accept Jesus’ will find meaning and purpose for their lives not least in a relationship with the living God.

[10] This new life is based on loving God and the neighbour as yourself: it is marked by high values. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control [Galatians 5, 22-23].” Such lives will be seriously different from lives that are motivated by, again for example, selfish-power; wealth and greed; sexual oppression or the use of violence. The writers give lots of practical details of this new life for individuals, situations, and even the state. Today we’d speak of the values of ethics and politics. They are especially significant and demanding for those who are meeting in churches and congregations.

[11] Let me sign-off [as Paul does]. “I Tony Holden write this with my own typing [rather than by dictation]. Blessings, grace and peace to you all at LMC. But one thing I urge you – read and study the Christian New Testament for yourselves!”

**Looking back at Easter 2015**

During Holy Week this year [2015] I found myself thinking back to the time I worked as a Methodist Church minister [between 1963 and 2003].

Naturally I had my own emphases that saw the Christian church establishing partnerships; engaging community politics and organizing; living and working at key urban issues to do with racial justice and taking sides with the poor and disadvantaged.

And then year on year this action [ministry and mission to use traditional language] had to be set against the story of Holy Week and Easter.

So I thought back to some of those events of which perhaps the most dramatic was getting stuck in a snow-storm on top of a hill near Wolverhampton whilst doing some Easter morning open-air celebration! More usually there were prayers, meditations, drama, processions, and music. There were many faithful people whose lives were fuelled and nurtured by these annual festivals.

And as these memories came I reflected on the decline that is still facing the Christian Churches in the UK.

Our local Church questionnaire and what is done with all those answers is a sign of our desire to be faithful and open.

But then I asked: “what remains, what persists, what continues to be important for me about Easter and the Christian Church?” My very ‘personal’ answer goes like this: What remains is -

[1] People and the practice of community

[2] A variety of rituals including the Eucharist or Holy Communion

[3] The text of the Jesus of the Gospels and our reflections and actions

[4] Conversations and dialogues about God, life, death, values and meaning

[5] Commitment to a way of living that includes non-violence, justice and peace

[6] Opportunities to develop and share human spirituality and pilgrimage

[7] And finally, and here we come to a major choice for all ‘believers and ideologues,’ “what remains is” the daily decisions that are to do with living in the world not only in the Christian church.

**Deaf Awareness with Gill Webster, Patricia Smith and John McCall 2014**

The four contributors know each other through belonging to the same church house group. All have hearing loss and three of us have some loss of vision. The terms ‘human rights’ [UN 1948] and ‘equal opportunities’ point to our desire to regard and treat people even-handedly. These social ambitions are crucial to human health and social cohesion. Christians seek to go beyond the duty of care and to offer, as in the Jesus story, additional care and consideration [see on retaliation and the extra mile Matthew 5, 38-42 and Luke 6, 29-30].

We want to encourage those we listen to and those we find difficult to hear to grasp the main issues of deaf awareness. Here are our top pointers –

1. Places with good lighting and little or no background noise are best for conversations.

2. Face the person, speak clearly with normal lip movements and facial expressions [don’t shout] – this helps lip-reading for those who can.

3. Check whether the person understands what you are saying and, if not, repeat it or try saying it in a different way.

4. On the phone make your introductory sentence long enough for the hearer to ‘tune in’ and emphasize and repeat who you are and why you are calling.

5. In small conversational groups only one person speak at a time!

6. Public speakers use the microphone and don’t drop your voice and where there is a loop-system don’t hit or blow into the microphone and check levels with users.

7. For those who have hearing loss and limited sight touch is important so as to know when someone is speaking: and obviously even greater consideration is needed.

8. For more information see http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk from which we have taken some of our points.

**Private and public boundaries 2013**

Cafes, travelling on the London tube and using Facebook all make me aware of boundaries. ‘Do they need to be so loud [shades of neighbour noise!]?’ ‘Should I join in this mobile phone conversation?’ ‘Is she really going to do a full-facial makeup?’ ‘Does that thin-man need to sit so that he takes up one and a half seats?’ ‘Will that drunk get off soon?’ ‘What’s on your mind?’ asks Facebook - well, ‘What of your mind do the rest of us need to see or read?’

So we learn, day by day, the changing attitudes that determine what is socially and legally acceptable. My hunch is that many of us set the boundary-line at skin-level. If they don’t touch us we are OK, certainly when car-driving.

Of course we have our preferences – some like noise others quiet, some large crowds some a few people, some to be demonstrative others to be internal, some have a deep desire to share themselves others are more guarded. Most of us cope with a mixture of all these alternatives.

But they do show up in religious practice and preference. I was fortunate in my working experience to share in different forms of worship, devotion and prayer over many occasions and many years – from Catholic through Methodist to black Pentecostal! But of course there are ones in which we feel at home and others in which, however hard we try, we feel uncomfortable.

Matthew’s Gospel – as often the tough bit is in the Gospels of Jesus - has some words of caution about religious activities when he writes of almsgiving, prayer, the Lord’s Prayer and fasting [Matthew 6, 1-18 and Luke has a version of the prayer at Luke 11, 1-4]. “Beware of practicing your piety before others [6, 1]” and “So whenever you give arms don’t sound a trumpet before you [6, 2]” and “whenever you pray do not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners [6, 5]” and “when you are praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do [6, 7].”

So what do I make of this – and this is me, me being personal!

[1] All of this may be about our inner-motives: having the right heart and the right intention!

[2] And I do remember the line in the Methodist Covenant Service about us taking on hard Gospel-tasks that go against our ‘natural inclination and temporal interest!’

[3] I admit my personal preference and need for space, distance, quietness, freedom from aggressiveness.

[4] But maybe my discomfort in large groups, loud worship, and demonstrative worship isn’t only to do with my introverted-self. Maybe it is also to do with my way, but only one way, of being faithful to these sayings in Matthew.

**Jesus on the ‘what more’ the ‘extraordinary’ that goes beyond self-interest, family and culture 2012**

At present there is so much loose criticism of religion. It ranges from justifiable condemnation of violence fuelled by religion through to complex philosophical issues to do with our current human understanding down to prejudice and cheap throw-away comments.

So we must be careful to call people’s attention to what is at the centre of, in our case, the Christian story. We have many interpretations not least those that are enshrined in our church movements and denominations. We also have many differing emphases to do with the text [including the importance of the Bible and the Old Testament over against the New Testament]; the church and authority; experience of the spirit; life within the church-community over against engagement in ethics and politics. Given our decline, the conflicts between religions and the general malaise it’s not surprising that some of the discourse and co-operation between Christians seems more angular and angry than ever!

But one thing is sure we all return to the Jesus of the Gospels for any basis for a ‘life in Christ.’ Matthew’s Gospel includes what we usually call the Sermon on the Mount [\*]. The Sermon includes these words [\*\* 5, 43-48]. “[43] You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ [44] But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. [46] For if you love those who love you what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? [47] And if you greet only your brothers [and sisters], what more [\*\*\*] are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? [48] Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

I often find myself turning over the words ‘what more,’ ‘what is extraordinary’ about loving those who love you?’ ‘What,’ I ask myself, ‘goes beyond our normal, natural and necessary self-interest and tribalism [family, mother-tongue, culture]?’ It’s this ‘what more’ this being ‘extraordinary’ that is required of us as Christians. ‘Love your enemies,’ Jesus says. Offer the more – the extraordinary. Naturally we take into account self-interest. Naturally we back our own people and our own tribes. But also, it is this ‘more’ this ‘extraordinary’ this sense that humans can do better – this commitment that we can ‘love others’ that we can ‘go beyond our own circle of privilege’ [our own brothers and sisters] that I have always found so compelling in the Jesus of the Gospels.

Notes \* Sermon on the Mount Matthew 4, 24 - 7, 29 and see Luke 6, 17 - 49 \*\* English translation: New Revised Standard Version Anglicized OUP 1995 \*\*\* The Greek word used in the text is ‘perissou’ meaning ‘extraordinary or exceptional.’ “Disciples must do more than others” says a ‘Theological Dictionary’ [Kittel/ Friedrich abridged by Geoffrey Bromiley 1985]. One online parallel Bible including Greek is at http://bible.cc/. The New English Bible translation [1961/ 1970] has at verse [47], “And if you greet only your brothers, what is there extraordinary about that?”

**Certainty and uncertainty 2011**

“Are you sure?” we ask: “Absolutely” or “well no!” we answer.

As with many things in life we move between certainty and uncertainty at different times in our lives and over different issues and events: think of families, jobs, a political party, a sports team, a religious faith.

For many of us belonging to a Christian church includes both certainty and uncertainty. In fact churches include people who are at different points on their journeys. Of course some Christian traditions take a tough line - unless you accept all the doctrines you are out: or if you break obvious rules you are out. The Methodist Church, as others, has been more ‘open.’

I’m not advocating doubt or as the New Testament has it being ‘lukewarm’ I’m saying most of us are not sure about everything all the time! The Jesus of the Gospels has stories about lost sheep, coins, and lost children [sons] and the joy when they are found or return [Luke 15]. It’s great when people are strong in the faith let them share it and live it! It’s great when people come to faith or re-find their faith let them be given gracious support. But what of those who say, “I don’t believe anymore so I’ve stopped attending.” I want to say, “Don’t leave the church because of doubts or because you can only offer a ‘critical loyalty.’”

A quote I like is, “The Christian faith is not so much a package to be sold, as an invitation to share an exploration of the human condition in the light of Christ [John Habgood].”

Here are what I intend as four encouraging comments

[1] Uncertainty is healthy - Most of us live, quite creatively and healthily, with some level of doubt, inconsistency, ignorance and uncertainty. To recognize that our world is shot-through with much that is random and contingent is more realistic than to believe for example in fate or Calvinistic ‘predestination’ or indeed Roman-style ‘good or bad fortune [luck].’

[2] Our ‘take’ on truth changes - We all can think back to ideas or facts or values that we once thought were true. It’s not just ‘flat-earthers’ who have changed! This happens as we get older; as life’s circumstances change; as our prevailing scientific and capitalist world-view offers us rewritings of history, new interpretations, new facts and new inventions.

[3] Working at truth-telling adds to the ‘common-good’ – our world keeps changing! Population is increasing, there is greater diversity of people where we live, new scientific truths flourish and persistent conflicts need to be politically resolved. It’s definitely not easy. Yet, not lying; working to find the truth; being tolerant contribute towards the common good.

[4] Searching for truth seeps into our certainty and uncertainty - At root it is about how we sustain our own love of life; how we live ‘with ourselves;’ how we are authentic people. In all of this seeking for truth means owning up to both certainty and uncertainty. Jesus in John’s Gospel says, “The truth will make you free [John 8, 32]:” and sometimes the truth is that I am not sure!

**In Remembrance Easter 2010**

As often Christian Church teaching on any important subject is long, complex and diverse. Here I am only trying to show why I value the ‘Holy Communion’ so much [but if you want more try for example the web’s Wikipedia on the word ‘Eucharist’!].

It is a sharing of food with all that is humanly important about eating together: “That vexed connection between what we believe and who we eat with [1].” Perhaps originally it was linked to an actual meal [2]. Now it is between people who know one another; who share food; who are in ‘fellowship.’ Doing this sustains them in what happens next on their life’s journey.

It is a remembering of Jesus: his life, teaching and [sacrificial] death as we have it in the New Testament texts. ‘The Lord’s Supper’ was the final meal that Jesus shared with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. English-speaking Christians use several names that are derived from the key New Testament passages: the Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, the Sacrament of the Table, the Blessed Sacrament, the Eucharist [thanksgiving], the Divine Liturgy [work], and the Mass [dismissal into the world]. All ‘remember’ and ‘rehearse’ the occasion when Jesus gave his disciples bread, saying, ‘This is my body’, and wine, saying, ‘This is my blood’ [3].

It is a symbolic ritual within worship that people value through tradition and habit, through ‘bonding’ with their community, through their own direct experience.

It is an action of transforming grace! Some emphasize what happens to the bread and wine [transubstantiation and a ‘real and true change’]; others regard it as a ‘reworking’ [re-enactment] of the sacrifice itself; others see it as an experience of the [real] presence of Jesus; still others stress it is to do with ‘union with Christ’ and God; some would see the transforming grace as coming through the archetype of the Christ or the feminine Mother Mary [Jung]. A World Council of Churches report describes it as ‘essentially the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit’ [4].”

It is a time of crisis [judgement]. It is a ‘moment:’ a ‘here and now’ moment that confronts us, to use ‘existential language.’ Through it we can each time [repeatedly] take living and dying seriously. Through it we have an opportunity, if we so desire, to imagine a ‘heavenly-feast’ after death where justice and peace reign [5].

But it is also a place of community meeting when this community of Christians, these local disciples of Jesus, go out after worship into their daily lives: “go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

Radically it is a life-choice and the repeated making of a decision: “I have set my face in one direction, I am determined to take this rather than that way, and the invitation, Biblically speaking, is for me to be faithful to that invitation [6].”

Notes - [1] Peter France ‘Journey - a spiritual odyssey’ 1998 [2] the agape or love-feast as it later became known [3] NT texts - 1 Corinthians 10, 16; 1 Corinthians 11, 20-24; Mark 14, 23-24 and Matthew 26, 26-29 and Luke 22,13-20 and John 13 including the story of foot-washing [4] World Council of Churches ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper No. 111’ Lima 1982 [5] See especially Mathew 25 for who is included and who excluded: “Taking sides especially with the poor, outsiders, strangers, women, children, the disadvantaged and vulnerable, the sick, the weak, the hungry, the marginalised and ‘the little ones,’ the wretched of the earth” [6] Brian Frost ‘Prayer and the Daily Struggle.’

**Financial crisis 2009**

We are in some mess! To be accurate I mean going by the media ‘we are in some mess.’ We have wars, a world-financial crisis, parliamentary dishonesty and right-wing election threats. What we don’t need with the imminence of European and Local elections is for people to back off politics. Saying a little rather than a lot is difficult but somehow we have to ‘get past’ the sheer weight of ethics and politics. Too much of the argument, discourse, contesting is to do with the source and inspiration of our values [as a Christian I go to the Jesus of the Gospels and “love God, love your neighbour, love your ‘self””]. Not enough is about negotiating common-values and seeking the power to exercise them. We desperately need to work at some new agreements as to how we make our ethical and political decisions. We need to encourage people to make space in everyday life for praxis as action-reflection [prayer, meditation, thinking, the silence before the song]. We need, as citizens in a plural society and an interdependent world, to establish some agreed basis of values from which decisions can be made. I’d go for something like this -

1. Respect yourself: the baseline of all values is valuing your ‘self’ - some choose ‘the road less travelled’ and go for devotion, meditation, non-violence, forgiveness, loving enemies

2. Honour the source and inspiration of your values: for some this means devotion to God to all it means being responsible as humans on planet earth

3. Keep to a world-view: commitment and life-values are to do with one world and one people in diversity, creativity, peace and justice

4. Don’t lie, don’t steal and don’t use violence: ‘do no harm’ as the Hippocratic oath has it

5. Treat all people as ‘proper people’ regardless of their givenness: all are human beings without exceptions of gender/sexuality; ethnicity/race; mother tongue; social and cultural stratification to do with tribe caste class religion; education; economic status; nationality – this means ‘loving [or at the least respecting] your neighbour a yourself’ [even-handedness, kindness, care, compassion]

6. Use the power you have not only out of self-interest but also for the common-good: this means negotiating conflicts; working for fairness and justice, living without seeking revenge

7. Take sides with the poor and disadvantaged: we need a better deal for the poor and disadvantaged including even-handedness towards women and men

**2008 Peter France ‘Journey a spiritual odyssey’ 1998**

1] Books, pilgrimages and journeys - Chris Watts’ review of Jane Leach ‘Walking the story’ together with Tony Morling’s pilgrimage took me back to a book I first read in 2001 and as often re-reading a valued book brings new insights.

2] Peter France ‘Journey – a spiritual odyssey’ [1998] – He went from working class Yorkshire to Oxford University and then, via National Service, to Government service in Fiji for 15 years. Partly through his love of acting he went to Bristol TV and natural history before becoming for many years from 1974 a writer/ presenter for BBC religious TV. After a second marriage and through meetings with exceptional people he continued with his own personal odyssey. Eventually he came to the Orthodox Church. There he found, on the Greek island of Patmos, the ‘shift in understanding’ he had always sought.

3] The ‘energies of God’ – People use different terms for what is often termed a ‘direct experience’ of God. Peter France and Orthodox Christians use ‘the energies of God.’ Some use ‘well-being’ or ‘meditative-focus’ or, as CS Lewis book title of 1955, ‘surprised by joy.’ It is to do with some ‘deep’ structure of consciousness but it is also about ‘being at home in your true self’ [Matthew 16 24-26]. The experience is of utterness and tears, of vastness and stillness, of otherness and completeness: it is certain, though fragile, and doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. It overflows with life and vigour: it is unlike being ordinary, fearful, anxious or depressed!

4] Approaches to the ‘energies of God’ - People differ in how they journey: we differ in what we seek and what we find. Here are some approaches and pointers

[a] There are many ways but a right time - “When you are ready it will happen. But you must want to be ready; you must put yourself patiently, again and again, in a position for it to happen. You must study, and meditate, and travel, above all perhaps travel, so that you can meet someone who can give you what I can only tell you about [Andrew Harvey ‘Journey to Ladakh’ 1983 page 138].”

[b] The boundaries between the inner and outer can mislead - “Without going outside, you may know the whole world. Without looking through the window you may see the ways of heaven [Lao Tzu ‘Tao Te Ching’].”

[c] Be careful in deserts - “The real journey of the ‘starets’ [elders] is not spatially into the desert, but spiritually into the heart [Kallistos Ware in ‘Modern Spirituality - an anthology’ 1985 page 44].”

[d] Use the names of God cautiously - “The self, of which the Mandala is a symbol, is the archetype of unity and totality. Jung believed that this archetype was the underlying reality manifesting itself in the various systems of monotheism. The self, therefore, is the God within [Anthony Storr summarising Jung in ‘Jung Selected Writings’ 1986 page 20 and see 229].”

[e] What is important is how you are changed - There is a story in the Jesus of the Gospel’s of a person finding treasure and a merchant coming across a pearl of great value. The stories remind us that revelation and discovery go together. In personal development and spirituality we have to both work at it and accept the gift: both are true [Matthew 13 44-46].” Yes