

THE
FLOWER
OF
LOVE.
By
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“All these things happened to me....”

PART 1.

If Ben Taylor looked out the western windows of his hilltop house he could see the spires and towers of the city against the primary colors of sunset. If he looked out the eastern windows he could see the low range of tree covered hills above which the delicate colors of dawn greeted the day.

Inside the house you would see the art and décor of Europe. His study contained books on archaeology and mythology, from photographs of the earth mother with her huge breasts to the tale of *Marduk*, slayer of the female monster *Tiamut* and founder of Babylon. You would also find books on Iranian dualism and the new paradigm – a vision of a holistic and immanent God.

There was little in the house to suggest he was gay.

“But it’s what they say that matters, what they tell people!” Julian Black was excited, articulate.

“I know that.” Ben replied.

“Half of them are *poofers* anyway.”

“So you keep saying.”

Julian always goaded Ben like this. Ben’s religion was like a red rag to his lover.

“I don’t know how you can go there!” Julian was incredulous.

“I go there,” Ben said, “to see God.”

“God! After what He’s done to us?”

“I don’t think God did it.”

“Who then?”

“No one. It just happened.”

Julian was silent, thoughtful.

“Go then!” He shouted and stormed out of the room.

Alone for a moment Ben pondered what Julian had said. Perhaps he was right and Ben was stupid to go to Church. No one had attacked him, however, people were quite supportive and anyway his presence in church reminded them that gay people still existed. It was not

as if he was hiding anything, people knew, but it would all mean nothing unless he could change things, change what they said. How did you do that?

He went through the ritual of leaving - coat, scarf, driving gloves, keys.

It was not winter, neither was it spring. It was still cold and he felt the cold. As he drove he could see young green shoots beginning to appear on the trees, nature making everything new again.

He turned the last corner and parked his car in the yard.

St. Aiden's church was old, old and new. The original church had been quite small, built in the Celtic style of the 1920s. As the congregation had grown the construction had been added to and now it stood like a hybrid sprawling across the lawn.

He entered the arched doorway.

The interior of the church was quiet. The light from the stained glass windows created a singular atmosphere – as if you were underwater. There was a presence, a warmth that he could feel. The organist was playing quietly.

“Hello Ben.” It was Jean.

“Hi.”

Jean was always friendly, as were the others, even if it didn't go past the church's door.

“How have you been?” The inevitable question.

“Good, good.” He beamed. “We went away for a couple of days. To the country.”

“Oh, good.” Her hospitality didn't extend to Julian. He was never mentioned by name.

She smiled.

Ben took his pew sheet and hymn book and sat down in his usual seat – near the front on the left of the congregation – at God's right hand. There were two or three others there already. Ben was always early.

While he was waiting he tried to tune in to God. Bowing his head he reached out with his feelings. There was usually something there.

People gradually arrived - couples, families. There weren't many children.

All of a sudden the music changed. A triumphant march. Everyone stood up including Ben.

Ben was glad. He had always felt close to God. He had dreams – vivid dreams – God was real!

There had been many prayers during the height of the pandemic. Many prayers and many voices. The voices were quieter now. He thanked God for that.

Scanning the pew sheet he noted the prayer for those resisting evil without violence.

“Jesus said, ‘My kingdom does not belong to this world, if my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. No, my kingdom does not belong here!’”(GNB)

There was a dramatic pause.

“God is opposed to violence.” The minister concluded.

There was silence, stunned silence. That wasn’t what they were used to. They were expecting Christ the Conquering King. Like the British Empire Ben thought. This was different. This was new.

The sound of a bell pierced the silence. The minister was holding a thick metal bowl. She had just struck it with a small wooden hammer. It was an oriental bell. The sound was amazing. It seemed to swell, become warm, and expand like an *Om*.

The bell was struck three times. The service continued.....

Afterwards everyone gathered in the adjacent room for fellowship.

Rowan was a musician. Arthur and Amy had been to the opera. He was sure Bill was gay but he wouldn’t admit it. Beth was an artist. It was she who had made the tasteful and inventive hangings which adorned the church from time to time. She sought him out.

“Oh Ben. I’m glad I caught you. Can you stand in for me next week? I’ve got a wedding on and I’m rostered to do morning tea. Are you available?” She looked up hopefully.

“Um, yes I think so. I’ll check my diary but you can pencil me in if you like.”

“Good, good. It’s such a hassle shopping around to find someone. I’m glad you can do it.”

He caught sight of Philip Newberry. Philip was an ex-rock musician who occasionally played guitar in church. There had been some sort of trouble with his band and he no longer worked in rock. Philip smiled shyly and his dark eyes lingered a moment before he turned to talk to Isabel Bennett, our minister.

“Do you have any nieces or nephews?” Beth was saying, “For weddings I mean.”

“Yes I do actually.” Ben was frank.

“Are they.....?”

“No not yet. Young people are so cautious these days. Both my sisters are divorced so I think they.....” He trailed off vaguely.

“Yes I see.”

“But they’re thinking about it. Most of them have been with someone for a while so we may have some weddings in the future.”

“Oh good.”

Beth herself had never married. I suppose you would call her a spinster. She had stayed young.

Ben signed off and left for the car. He didn't like to talk to too many people – he found it confusing.

When he arrived home Julian was surfing the Net.

"I have to do community time next week, Beth's got a wedding."

"So you'll be late. I know."

There was silence.

"Anything interesting happen?" Julian was curious despite himself.

"Yes. Isabel's got this fantastic bell. It's oriental. A sort of metal bowl. You hit it with a hammer."

"I think I've seen one somewhere."

"I want one." Ben was chuffed. "I must ask Isabel where she got it."

"Probably overseas – Japan or somewhere."

"I hope not. I'm not going to Japan to get one."

Julian laughed. He knew Ben well. Before long there would be an oriental bell in the study.

Ben sat alone in the study leafing through his book of reproductions. He always found this settled him. It seemed to make peace between the warring factions of his personality.

Ben always gravitated to sublime images of God. Isabel would object if God was represented as both human and male but for Ben this was God the Father and he craved his father's love.

Ben's own father, Ken, had been distant, always preoccupied with work. He had run his own accounting business. Ben had always been much closer to his mother, Kath, but her rather clinging style of love had never satisfied him. Before his father's death Ben had realized that his father had done the best he could. Ken's parents, Ben's grandparents, had been strict disciplinarians and Ben had understood that his father had never received the

love that he had needed as a child and as a result had been unable to show love to his children as an adult. So Ben, after much bitterness, had been reconciled with his father.

“You’re not looking at that again are you?” Julian had entered the room without Ben noticing.

“I find it restful.”

“Restful? I’m surprised you can look at it at all.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll put it away.” Ben carefully closed the book and replaced it on the bottom shelf of the bookcase.

“What would you like to do?” Ben was amiable.

Julian liked this. Ben was available to him at last.

“I thought we might make love.” He said.

“Oh!” Ben was taken by surprise. Julian was younger, his sex drive more urgent.

“What did you have in mind?” Ben queried.

“Well, we could watch *Muscle Mania* and then.....”

“Again!”

“It’s my favourite.”

“O.K., do you want surround sound? What soundtrack would you like?” The soundtrack on the D.V.D. was uncompromisingly bland. They preferred to replace it with music of their choice.

Ben smiled wryly and followed Julian upstairs to the broad lounge room. A huge plasma screen dominated the north wall of the room. Six tall speakers surrounded the comfortable green couch. Ben covered the expensive material with two large white towels before they removed their clothes. Julian threw his clothes carelessly on the floor while Ben carefully folded his and placed them on a chair.

Ben’s body was stout with large arms. Middle age had padded out his waistline somewhat. Julian’s was tight from working out. His thick thighs and round buttocks pleased Ben immensely.

The music blared out as the two mighty muscle men arrived in the locker room and began to strip off. It was at this moment that the line between reality and fantasy became blurred and remained so until the moment of climax after which a rather tawdry reality reasserted itself.

“You can’t beat that Rocky Stallion,” was Ben’s comment.

“He always does it for me.” Julian was firm.

They were quiet as they cleaned up then flopped down on the couch in each other’s arms.

“You know I wish we could have children.” Julian was earnest now.

“Children? We’re not even married.”

“Very funny.”

There was silence.

“Do you want to get married?” Julian enquired quietly.

“Do you think you could stand me all the time?”

“I can stand you , just.”

“Is that good enough?” Ben was uncertain. “I seem to get on your nerves sometimes.”

They had been together now for three years. There was no spoken prohibition on outside lovers but AIDS proscribed too much cruising. Perhaps that was a thing of the past. Neither of them liked the gay scene but there was little in society to support gay relationships. They had to work at it themselves. Ben wondered whether it was possible to make it last with Julian. He was so different in many ways. But the sex was good even if Julian was addicted to outside stimulus.

“Do you love me Julian?”

There was a pause.

“You’re quaint. I’m fond of you.”

That wasn’t too bad. He could have said “I hate you” - someone had.

“Well we have to have our own space. We can’t live in each other’s pockets all the time.”

Ben felt a little guilty.

Julian didn’t seem to be able to amuse himself without help whereas Ben had too much to do. He had learned at a young age to keep himself occupied without anyone’s assistance and there was also his work.

“You need an interest. Do you want to get a job?”

Ben’s work as an architect brought in more than enough money to support the two of them but Julian got bored on his own. He became argumentative and demanding.

“You’re right,” he said, “I need an interest.”

“While I’m working.”

“Yes.”

Ben knew what the problem was. Julian was living through him not living his own life. His dream of a lover was so strong that he relied entirely on Ben for his happiness but Julian was not a child.

“You’re not stupid . How about a degree?”

“A degree?”

“No?”

“I’d like to do something for gay people.” Julian was vague.

“Good idea. What did you have in mind?”

“I’m not sure. Not AIDS. I’m not a nurse. Something that would last. Something permanent.”

Ben realised that Julian’s life had been different to his. Ben had grown up in the 1960’s and 70’s when homosexuality had been acceptable, even glamorous. Julian, however, had lived with AIDS since his teens and there was bitterness, fear.

“I’ll think about it.” Julian concluded.

“Good.”

Ben hugged him tight then released him.

“I have to work now.”

A few days later Ben was listening to music in the lounge room. Julian was out. Ben didn’t want to live alone but he enjoyed his own company. He liked to listen to music not just as entertainment but as a therapy – a cure.

The violin solos were exquisite and the finale swelled like an ocean, overwhelming him, bringing tears.

Julian had asked him if he wanted to get married. Did he? Did he want to marry Julian? He wasn’t sure.

The music became tumultuous. You could hear the turmoil, the passion. Ben could listen to this but he wasn’t like that himself. He was rather detached emotionally. Although he had known passion when he was young it had not been confusing. He had known exactly what he wanted. Julian certainly met his requirements physically but were they compatible in other ways?

An ethereal harp signaled the ending. The drums beat dramatically and the trumpets sounded the deep final note.

He replaced the C.D. in its cover and filed it in his C.D. pillar.

It was starting to get dark. He closed the rose velvet curtains at each end of the lounge room and turned on the crystal lamp. The low light was very soothing. The large

comfortable lounge room seemed suddenly forlorn. He picked up the phone and dialed his sister. Bronwyn would be home, she usually was in the evening.

“Hello?” Her voice was high, quizzical.

“Hi, it’s me, Ben. Thought I’d just give you a ring to see what you’re up to.”

“It’s funny you should ring now. I was just thinking about you and Julian.” Bronwyn was a bit psychic.

“Really?”

“Yes I just pulled a card – the knight of swords – and I thought who do I know who is male and dark? And I thought Julian.”

“And what did the cards say about Julian?”

“Well I drew the Fool – new beginnings – he hasn’t left you has he?”

“No, but he is having new beginnings as you call it. He’s getting involved with a gay anti-violence group. That’s where he is now.”

“Oh good.” She was genuinely pleased.

“Anyway I was wondering if you could do something for me.”

“Yes?”

“Could you read the cards for me. Should Julian and I get married?”

“Married?!”

“Yes.”

“O.K. just a moment.”

There was a long silence.

“O.K. I’ve got three cards. First is the Five of Wands which means initial conflict. Next is the Hierophant which means official sanction, meaning marriage. The third one is the Ten of Cups which is happiness, family, children etc.. How’s that?”

“Sounds good.”

“It is good.”

“O.K. so it’s good.” Ben couldn’t quite believe it. “So how are you anyway,” he added lamely.

“I thought you’d never ask....”

After a conversation in which Bronwyn sketched her life with Isis, her cat, Ben rang off and, with no sign of Julian returning, went straight to bed.

His dreams were full of conflict. He was dressed in a dark suit walking to church to be married, presumably to Julian, who was nowhere to be seen. The minister who was with him wasn't Isabel. He was a stranger. There were crocodiles, which he knew meant enemies, but he wasn't attacked. A woman with a pair of scissors put a pink rosebud in his button hole. He woke up before they reached the church.

It was about 7 o'clock.

He got up and did his weights in the home gym on the ground floor. He usually did this before breakfast except on Sundays when he went to church. Today was Thursday.

The phone rang. It was Robert, Ben's brother.

"Are you busy? Can I talk to you for a minute." He sounded agitated.

"I'm not busy. Would you rather I came over."

"Could you? I need someone to talk to."

"O.K. I'll be there soon." Ben rang off.

"Was that Robert?" Julian had surfaced while Ben was on the phone.

"Yes I'm going over."

"Now?"

"Yes now."

"You can't keep running around after him all the time you know."

"He's my brother Julian. I'll be back before lunch."

Ben couldn't worry about that now. He was out the door and on his way.

Robert lived in a nearby suburb. Ben partially subsidized the rent for a modest house; it was the only way that Robert could survive. The pension was not enough to live on.

Robert was schizophrenic. He had been hearing voices since he was nineteen. He was considerably better now - the new medications were much improved. From time to time, however, he needed someone to talk to and Ben made himself available.

Ben parked his car in the driveway. The garden had that slightly neglected look which Ben associated with paid gardeners. It looked unloved he thought.

When Robert answered the door he didn't smile but showed Ben into the dim lounge room.

Robert looked like Ben only younger and better looking. He seemed nervous.

"What's wrong?" Ben asked calmly.

"Well I've had voices saying that I'm going to Hell again."

"And do you believe them?"

“Not really but they insist. It’s hard to explain. They sort of overwhelm you. It started last night when I went to bed. A voice said ‘You’re going to Hell you know’ and then the fear, the feeling of caving in.....”

“I see.” This had happened before. “Did the voice say why you were going to Hell?”

“No.....”

“Well then what reason could there be?”

“They say I’m bad – it’s all to do with sex.”

“Well if anybody was going to Hell for sex it would be me, and I’m not. So you can rest assured that these voices are not coming from God. I don’t know where they come from but they’re definitely not from God. Only God can send you to Hell - if there is a Hell.”

“Right.....” Robert seemed reassured.

“Good, so I’ll pray for you and mention it to Isabel. She’ll include you in the prayers on Sunday. Have you taken your medication? Do you want me to call the doctor?”

“No. He’ll just say to take more medication.”

“Have you taken more medication?”

“Not yet but I will.”

“What do you think triggered this off? Have you been watching anything on T.V..”

“Nothing different, just the sport and the news.”

“No videos?”

“No.”

“O.K. did you get any sleep?”

“Not much.”

“Well take an extra *Seroquel* and lie down for a while.” *Seroquel* were sedative Ben knew.

“O.K.” Robert seemed calmer now.

“I’ll ring you after lunch and see how you are. Is there anything else I can do?”

“No. It helps if someone contradicts them. The voices I mean.”

“You can rest assured. You’re not going to Hell. Just keep contradicting them.”

“O.K..”

Ben made sure Robert took his tablet and saw him to bed before leaving. Schizophrenia was a baffling illness but Ben had learned from experience how to handle Robert. Ben had some authority in spiritual matters and spiritual matters seemed to dominate Robert’s illness. Ben was glad he was able to help.

On Sunday Ben asked Isabel to pray for Robert in the prayers of intercession. A lot of people in the Progressive Christian movement didn't believe in an interventionist God but Ben had had experience of the effectiveness of prayer. On more than one occasion he had prayed, or asked for others to pray, on behalf of someone and the prayers had been answered – the person's health had improved or they had found a solution to their problem, usually through the appearance of another person, in most cases a church going Christian. To Ben this was proof, not that God existed, he already believed that, but that God cared and answered prayers, not always immediately or in the way that we might expect but answers none the less.

Timing was vital. Ripeness was the Biblical term. It seemed to Ben that the more specific you were the more effective the prayer became.

“.....and we pray for Robert Taylor who is suffering from schizophrenia. We pray for him to find peace and comfort in God and that he be relieved of the voices that torment him.....”

Isabel had remembered Robert. Ben was pleased.

After Ben had completed his morning tea duties he was about to leave when he caught sight of Isabel in the narthex.

“Thanks for the prayers for Robert. I really appreciate that.”

“Oh good. We all hope he improves. Why don't you bring him along to church?”

“I don't think Robert would want to come but I'll ask him.”

“God moves in mysterious ways.”

“Indeed.”

“Are you going to the meeting this afternoon?”

There was a progressive meeting that afternoon at St. Aiden's.

“Oh yes. Thank you for reminding me. I'd forgotten it was today. I've been so busy, what with Robert and..... other things.....”

“See you this afternoon then.”

“Yes goodbye or should I say *au revoir*.”

Julian was not happy about Ben's meeting. He went to his room to sulk. Ben almost decided not to go but thought better of it. Staying home would not solve anything.

There must have been close to a hundred people in the church hall as the meeting began. They were to have three speakers plus questions from the audience.

The first speaker was a woman in her fifties, a disaffected Catholic, called Carmen Morecroft. She spoke about her metamorphosis from unquestioning believer to radical doubter. She had begun to question her church's dogma when she had been approached for sex by a priest. He had wanted her to be his special friend. She had known what that meant. Her belief had been shattered. How could a priest do such a thing? Perhaps they were not infallible after all.

She had begun to read some of the new theologians, which had been banned by her church, and had found much that she had suspected but had had no evidence. For example original sin, a strict point of Catholic dogma, had always seemed unlikely from a loving God and she believed in a loving God. Many things had followed from that – redemption through the blood of Christ, penal substitution theology, penance, judgment – all these things had begun to seem unlikely to her and the new theologians had put forward authentic scholarship to support these claims.

She had found it liberating. So much so that she had left the Catholic Church altogether.

She asked for questions.

A woman stood up and asked her about women priests.

She was in favor.

Ben wanted to ask her about her attitude towards homosexuality in the Church but he restrained himself.

During the course of the questions it became apparent that she supported diversity, marginalized people and minorities. This was code for homosexuals. Ben was happy with that.

The second speaker was a retired minister over seventy called Henry Whitecross. He was surprisingly open-minded and spoke about the weight of Biblical scholarship that supported unorthodox views. This scholarship had been around for 150 years but ministers had not been game to preach it from the pulpit. It was only recently that the people in the pews had become aware of this scholarship as a few ministers had begun to incorporate some of it in their services.

He saw this as a good thing, if a little belated. He regretted his lack of courage while he was in the cloth.

Ben thought of all the gay priests and ministers who would regret their lack of courage.....

The third speaker was young, maybe thirty. He was definitely Generation Y. His name was Matthew Lucas. He was not as assured as the first two on theology but when he spoke of practical matters, like helping drug addicts, he was surprisingly strong.

He had some residue of the faith equals fundamentalism mentality which had followed the fall of Christendom, infecting the young in particular, but he was open to progressive ideas and believed in a benevolent God.

He was the most accepting of homosexuals, mentioning them by name as a persecuted minority. Ben found this progress promising.

There was a bit of mingling and tidying up before Ben left for home.

He found these meetings refreshing. They reinforced his beliefs. Beliefs he had always had but, like the first speaker, had had no proof. These meetings had changed that. Now there was evidence. His faith was strengthened by questioning. After that he relied on the evidence of his own experience.

Progressive Christianity was growing in the mainstream Churches. It was yet to be seen, however, whether this could save the once mighty edifice of Christianity from oblivion. It was not incompatible with *New Age Spirituality*, in fact they shared much in common, but Church? He didn't know. There were so many negatives : guilt, fear, sexism, homophobia, and now there was the sex abuse scandal. He doubted that the Church could survive.

What would replace it?

New Age Spirituality seemed so tied up with success, getting what you want out of life – worldliness the Bible called it – was that the aim of spirituality? It seemed a contradiction to him. People were so confused and the media didn't help. "Why, why, why?" "How could God allow this?" "Tougher penalties", "victim's rights", "revenge", "rot in Hell forever". The media demanded these things.

Was it better? Better or worse? The worst aspects of religion were gone, in the west at least, despite some reactionary fundamentalism, but most had thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Compassion, forgiveness, understanding, charity – the best of religion – seemed to be going as well. People were obsessed with celebrity culture and shopping. Nothing else was left.

Ben was glad of his faith - it brought perspective, understanding - but try telling Julian that!

He pulled his car into the double garage and switched off the engine. He sat for a moment, composing himself.

Julian's car was there. He must be home.

Ben took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. These meetings were very stimulating, exciting sometimes. He needed to slow down before facing Julian.

When he finally went inside Julian was surprisingly mild.

"How did it go?"

"Good." Ben replied. He wondered if Julian was really interested or if he was just being polite.

"Were there many people there?"

"Over a hundred."

"Really?" Julian sounded impressed.

"I find it interesting." Ben said rather defensively.

"What the lectures or the fact that there were a hundred people there?"

"Both."

Julian smiled wryly. Ben was no fool.

The next day Ben received a telephone call from Robert.

"Did you say you were going to pray for me in church yesterday?"

"Yes. We did. Why?"

"Well last night, just as I was lying down to go to sleep, the voices stopped or changed anyway. It was strange, as if the voices were interacting like perceptions and perceptions of perceptions, if you can follow that, and it moved from the hostile voices to friendly ones as if they were different people."

"I don't know if I understand what you're saying but I'm glad that the voices are better."

"And it's stayed that way too." Robert sounded excited. "I had my first good night's sleep in days."

"Thank God for that." Ben was deliberately ambiguous.

"Thanks anyway."

"No trouble."

Robert rang off and Ben was left feeling confused but elated. It was not the first time his prayers had been answered. He must remember to thank God before he went to bed.

When he was young he had thought that you were not supposed to bother God with your prayers. He had really only prayed when he was desperate.

It was Adrian who had said to him that God wants to communicate and that prayer is communication with God. Since then he had prayed more regularly. It now seemed to Ben that prayer was a kind of merging with God, as if the attitude of benevolence and blessing was like God's self.

Adrian Burton had been Ben's minister during the height of the AIDS crisis. Ben had been to see him on many occasions to talk about homosexuality and the Church. Despite the knee jerk reaction of conservatives, Adrian had assured him that God did not reject gay people and had encouraged Ben to pray for his gay friends. He had even mentioned AIDS in church.

The pandemic had forced gay people inwards, towards the epicenter of the crisis. It had also thrown up all sorts of religious issues. Things like punishment for sexual excess, illness, even homosexuality itself. Ben had read books about Christianity and homosexuality. The debate in his Church had helped a great deal.

Homosexuality was never mentioned now. It was like being de-sexed. Church was still so uptight about sex that any reference to it was frozen out. The subject came up occasionally at the progressive meetings but it had somehow gone cold. They needed to relax more, overcome their fears. Ben wondered what he could do to hot it up a little.

Rock the boat, stir things up..... but how?

They were evading the issue. It affected Ben – he kept forgetting he was gay – as if you could not be spiritual and gay as well.

Could he pray about that?

Julian appeared. He had been showering and dressing.

"Who was that on the phone?"

"Rob. He's much better."

"Good. That's a relief." Julian eyed him suspiciously. "What are you so pleased about? You're glowing."

"Oh....um.... we prayed for Robert in Church yesterday and now he's better."

"You don't think that caused his recovery do you?"

"Well....yes."

"It had to go one way or the other. It's just a coincidence." Julian was certain.

"If you say so."

"It's pathetic all these people around the world praying to God, thinking that they are affecting things. They're not you know."

"I don't agree."

"Please yourself." Julian took a big bite of the toast he had been making. "What will we do today? Are you working?"

"Not necessarily. How about we go for a drive?"

"Where to?"

"The country."

"O.K. I'll get ready."

They headed east along the highway to the hills, where they had an early lunch at one of the galleries, then veered slightly to the north.

"Where are we going? Asked Julian. He was becoming anxious.

"You'll see."

Lysterfield Lake was a place that Ben knew well. He had come here during the nineties. Before the entrance there was a big white house with a windmill outside. The gates to the estate were large and impressive. They drove in and parked in the public car park.

It was a short walk down to the lake. There was a long, low dike at the south end along which you could walk to the far side which was submerged in bush. The lake itself was quite large. Several sand bars streaked the silver surface like mirages.

Ben felt calm. It was here that he had imagined the sick being healed, as if Jesus had been there and people had brought their sick friends. The place still had a powerful effect on him. One time he had walked right around the circumference of the lake as the westering sun had sunk in the sky. He had only just made it back before the gates closed for the day.

Julian was bewildered. "It's cold." He said.

"Yes."

Ben could see hands pouring water over dark sores, the hateful marks melting mildly away. He had prayed for this - a cure - but there was no cure yet, only management, which was better than nothing.

"Let's go." Julian was worried.

"O.K.. We can drop in to see Bronwyn on the way back."

Bronwyn lived alone in the hills. She had a small house surrounded by trees. She was a retired nurse and made some extra money by doing tarot readings at local fairs. She would be home Ben was sure.

When they knocked at her door there was a long delay before she answered.

“Ben! Julian! What a surprise! Come in.”

The inside of the house was dark but as your eyes adjusted you could make out all sort of religious symbols : Pre-Raphaelite prints, statues of Buddhas and angels, a purple bead curtain decorated with stars, all sorts of crystals and gemstones.....

Bronwyn lit a couple of candles and gestured to the chintz couch.

“I’ll put the kettle on.”

“Thanks.” Ben was thirsty.

Julian was warming himself by the fire. Ben sank into the soft couch surrounded by cushions.

Bronwyn reappeared with a small pot of tea and three mugs on a tray.

“You look worried Julian. Do you want a reading?”

“No thanks!” Julian was quite uncomfortable with all this mumbo-jumbo. Bronwyn was not his favorite person but it was warm and comfortable here and there was tea. Bronwyn only had tea. Coffee was banned.

“So to what do I owe this unexpected honor.” She quipped.

“We went for a drive up to Lysterfield Lake and.....” Ben trailed off.

“I see.” Bronwyn looked quite pleased. She glanced suspiciously at Julian. “Have you seen mum lately?” She asked Ben.

“Why? Is something wrong?” Ben was alarmed.

“No. Nothing unusual.”

“I haven’t seen her for a few weeks. I’ll be going soon.” Ben felt guilty. Bronwyn always had this effect on him. She had a knack of hitting the spot. It was unnerving.

Julian looked like he was going to explode.

Isis, Bronwyn’s black cat, appeared from nowhere and landed in Ben’s lap.

“She’s possessing you,” was Bronwyn’s comment.

Julian shifted uncomfortably. He hated cats. He was a dog person.

“I had this dream,” began Bronwyn, “You were on television giving some sort of interview. You were famous or something. Everyone was after you. In a good way I mean. When I looked up my dream book all it said was ‘Success of hopes’. You know how vague these books are. It seemed significant to me. What do you think?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” was Ben’s reply, “It sounds good though. Keep it up.”

Julian laughed nervously.

“How are Fiona and David?” They were Bronwyn’s children. Ben knew better than to mention her ex-husband Paul.

“They’re fine. Fiona’s still with Nathan. She’s very much the career woman – very capable, very ambitious – climbing the corporate ladder. David’s overseas, in Germany, he’s working there in telecommunications. Kate’s gone with him. She’s teaching at an international school. I think they’re fairly serious, so fingers crossed.” She held up two crossed fingers.

“Have you heard from Carolyn?” She was Ben’s other sister.

“No. I think she’s still in Sydney. I’ve lost track.”

“I must ring her to catch up.”

Bronwyn went on to complain about her guttering and her neighbors before Ben said they had to go.

On the way home Julian remained silent. He went up to his room as soon as they arrived.

Ben was left to his own devices. He wondered what Bronwyn’s dream could mean. He certainly wasn’t famous. Not yet anyway.

He went down to the ground floor study. Dark wooden bookcases covered most of the wall space. There was an eighteenth century English landscape above the leather topped desk. All electronic equipment was concealed behind oiled wooden doors. There was a stereo player behind one of them. He put on some music – *The Renaissance*.

He drew the heavy green curtains and reclined in one of the leather armchairs. He could have been an English country lord alone in his manor house. He wasn’t. He was Ben Taylor Melbourne architect and he was worried.

Julian was becoming more distant, less communicative. He sulked a lot. Was he becoming disillusioned with Ben? Was there someone else? Julian had talked in glowing terms about someone at the *Anti-Violence Group*. What was his name? James something. Ben knew that his life was not an endless round of excitement for the younger man. He was not a celebrity, neither was he a celebrity junkie. His life was settled and calm. Julian was bored. Ben would have to wait and see whether Julian’s new involvement led him away or not. He resolved to take more notice of what Julian was doing. He would ask him more often about his new interest.

Not wishing to fall asleep in his chair like an old man Ben switched off the music and went upstairs.

The long lounge room ran right across the front of the upstairs floor. It was from here that he could see to the west or to the east. Now the sun was going down over the city. The garish colors lit up the room for a moment before darkness fell.

He closed the rose velvet curtains at each end of the room and sat down on the huge green couch. To each side of the plasma screen there were matching paintings of Melbourne's Botanical Gardens by a local artist. The style was almost impressionist. They had been expensive but Ben had fallen in love with them; they seemed to suit the room so beautifully. He had nothing to do.

He hurried into the kitchen and began preparing dinner.

While Julian was out Ben worked on the plans for a huge holiday house to be built on the Mornington Peninsula overlooking the sea. The client was a well known Melbourne fashion designer. He had given Ben an outline of his requirements and left the rest to him. This suited Ben. He was able to indulge his imagination and ingenuity to create something quite original.

After a while he took a break and went out to get the mail : several bills and charity letters, a letter from, he turned the envelope over, Philip Newberry.

Once inside he opened Philip's letter using his gold letter opener. It read :

18 August 2008

Dear Ben,

I am writing to you about something which has been kept secret for almost half a century. In fact it is the great secret of our time.

Since the mid-twentieth century, when rock music evolved from jazz, musicians have been selling their souls to the Devil and practicing Satanism and black magic in their music.

I know this because I was involved with them.

They make a pact with the Devil to make them famous and rich, for money and sex. Then they use their music to create death, suicide and evil.

They call themselves Dogs – that's Gods backwards.

There are messages recorded backwards underneath the music. You may have heard of backtracking.

They have books on black magic and witchcraft which involves killing things. They use and promote drugs.

They use astrology too but not positively. They feed the negatives of each sign and planet, like : anger for Mars, escapism for Neptune, insanity for Aquarius etc.. They disguise themselves as messiahs and prophets, even saints. They are whited sepulchers.

When I refused to sell my soul with them and left the band I had terrible nightmares and heard voices cursing me, saying they're going to kill me, tempting me, trying to trick me. The worst was damnation, which they said was forever.

That is why I came to Church to see if I could stop them. I don't listen to rock music at all now - it seems that all of rock is involved somehow. Some of them are famous people.

It's much better now. Isabel has been very helpful. Together we have reversed some of the negative messages and images replacing them with positive ones : blessings, angels, heaven etc..

As soon as I stopped listening to rock music things began to improve.

There have been many prayers

It is not just rock musicians either. There are also famous actors, directors, writers, sportsmen and women, media and advertising people. There is a whole network of them and they use the mass media. One of their symbols is a spider's web – a web of evil that ensnares everyone.

I cannot just keep this information to myself. I thought that you might be someone who might benefit from this knowledge.

I know it seems incredible but I assure you that it is absolutely true.

Yours Sincerely,
Philip Newberry.

Ben stared at the letter in amazement. Was he mad? Was he on drugs? Was it true? Ben only listened to classical music. He had never really liked rock. Something was nagging at the back of his mind, he had heard something like this before.

“What’s that?”

Ben had been so engrossed in the letter that he hadn’t heard Julian come in.

“Um.....a letter from someone at Church.”

“About what?”

“He says rock musicians sell their souls to the Devil.” Ben had blurted it out without thinking.

“Really.”

“Yes really.”

“Let me see.” Julian was suspicious.

Ben let Julian take the letter and watched in silence as he read it through.

“It doesn’t look that way to me.” Julian had an extensive collection of popular C.D.s.

“He says they’re disguised.”

“Is he a fundamentalist?”

“Not at St. Aiden’s, not with Isabel.”

“You don’t believe it do you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well put it away. I’ve got a movie.”

“Oh, O.K..”

The rest of the evening passed in a daze and they went to bed early.

That night Ben had a dream. He was staring at the letter from Philip Newberry and he heard a voice :

“What he says is true but there is no Devil.”

“But how.....”

“Explanations.”

He woke up with a start. It was dawn. Light was seeping through the floral curtains.

6:45 am.. – too early to get up.

Ben remembered his dream.

“Explanations?”

Answers to questions like - why do bad things happen to good people?

The Devil made me do it?

He must ask Philip about it.

He got up and went to the bathroom.

Breakfast was delicious. He loved buttered toast in the morning.

Somehow the dream had released his mind. He felt calm and composed. Yes, he must ask Philip about it.

The next Sunday afternoon Ben went to visit his mother. Philip Newberry had not been at Church so Ben had been unable to speak to him about the letter.

Kath Taylor lived alone in a small house in a leafy suburb of Melbourne. Her Christian name was Mary but she now preferred to use her second name Kathleen, Kath for short. She was eighty years old. She had taught yoga until she was seventy-five so she was remarkably healthy for her age. Her husband Ken had died some time ago, after which she had become a full time yoga teacher.

“Hi mum.” Ben kissed her on the cheek.

“Hello dear, come in.”

She was small and sweet. Her hair was immaculately coifed and she was dressed rather conventionally in a blue skirt and cardigan.

The room was light and airy despite the heating. Ben sat down in one of the beige velvet armchairs.

“How are you dear?” She asked.

“Oh fine. I just thought I'd keep in touch.”

“Yes. Bronwyn told me you were coming.”

“Yes. We went for a drive, me and Julian, up to Lysterfield Lake.”

“Lysterfield Lake? I don’t know it.” Kath looked mystified.

“It’s on the way to Emerald.”

“And how was that?”

“Excellent. We dropped in to see Bronwyn on the way home.”

“Are you still going to Church?” She asked rather suddenly.

“Oh yes. We’ve been having what they call progressive meetings.”

“What do you mean?”

“Modern theologians you may not know them.”

“I could never go back to Church. Not after yoga. Institutional Christianity is so negative, so full of fear and guilt. They frighten little children and bully women.”

Kath had been brought up in the Roman Catholic Church and had spent many years struggling to escape her early conditioning. She was free now and did not intend to relinquish that freedom.

“I don’t find it too bad at St. Aiden’s.”

“No?”

“I was wondering whether I should ask Robert to go. Isabel, our minister, suggested it.”

“Don’t make Robert feel he has to go there.” Kath was very protective of Robert. She didn’t want him indoctrinated and terrified by the Church and she said so.

“It was just an idea.” Ben replied lamely.

“Robert’s voices are bad enough without that.”

Robert had continued to live with Kath and Ken for a long time after he had been diagnosed. She knew his problems well and thought she knew what caused them. She kept it to herself however.

“I don’t mind you visiting Robert, that’s helpful, but I don’t want you filling his mind up with all that claptrap.” She was adamant.

“O.K..” Ben conceded. He knew what she was like in this mood – there was no point opposing her.

Kath had learned yoga from an Indian guru named Chittananda who had migrated to Australia in the 1960s. Ben had met him a couple of times but had never cottoned on to yoga. Chittananda was dead now and there were rumors of infidelity and financial scandals which Kath dismissed as idle gossip or malice.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Coffee?” Ben was not a tea drinker, except when he was at Bronwyn’s.

Kath busied herself with the afternoon tea. She brought a plate of biscuits with the drinks.

“You know when you get to my age,” she began, “you start to realize just how important your family is.” She was humble now, grateful. “I don’t know how I would manage without my children.”

“Good karma I expect.” Ben was generous.

She liked this. Karma was one of her strong points.

“Do you think so?”

“If you do a lot of helping people the chances are that people will help you.” Ben was pleased with his logic.

“Yoga says that you know.”

“I know.”

Kath had helped both Bronwyn and Carolyn when their marriages were in trouble. She had even helped when Ben had announced he was gay. Ben had always thought that this was part of the reason she had left the Church. Many years of caring for Robert and advising her students added up to a lot of helping. If anyone had good karma she did.

Their little tea party was coming to a close. Ben got up to leave.

“I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.” He assured her.

“Say hello to Julian.”

Ben said goodbye and let himself out.

Ben had never studied yoga seriously but he had read some of Kath’s books on Indian philosophy. Very intelligent. Very logical. Subjective science they called it. Enlightenment and morality.

Ben knew that Chittanada was homophobic. One of his gay friends had gone to him in the 1970s and Chittananda had told him that if he wanted to be a spiritual person he would have to give up being homosexual - as if it was a bad habit or a hobby. Needless to say his friend had not lasted there.

He had never told his mother that. He didn’t see the point of upsetting her.

Homosexuality and religion – what a mix. He was right in the middle of it. He fancied himself as a kind of mediator between God and homosexuals on earth. Was that egotistical? He believed that God was real and that God did not condemn homosexuals, even after AIDS, especially after AIDS.

That night Ben's dreams were chaotic and symbolic. He was late for Church and the minister was angry. Adrian Burton was among the ministers and priests that were assembled in a strange cathedral. There were a number of sacred objects being handled. Ben was sitting in the front pew so he could see quite clearly. There was a chalice, a censor, a brass hat stand, a robe, a staff – symbols of office and power. There was some dispute in which he was involved but he couldn't discern what it was about. Suddenly he woke up.

It was still dark. The clock said 2:45 am. It was cold.

He went back to sleep and dreamt again. Isabel was driving a car in which Ben was a passenger. They stopped at a red light and waited for the traffic to pass. Time passed and the lights did not change. The traffic kept passing. More time passed. He asked Isabel what was happening and she looked at him quizzically and said, "What do you mean?" "Why is it taking so long for the lights to change?" "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about." Ben swallowed his anger. He got out of the car and started to walk. The traffic was frantic but he managed to get through between a red sports car and a huge truck. On the other side was a park. Smooth green lawns rolled down to a thicket of trees. Men were having sex among the trees. Suddenly he was in Medieval England. Men were still having sex among the trees but those who were clothed wore medieval costumes.

As he awoke the sun was coming up. Gentle rays of light pierced the darkness.

At breakfast Julian was strangely jolly.

"What are you so happy about?" Ben asked.

"It's a surprise."

"What's a surprise?"

"I can't tell you."

"I see." Ben smiled. He prodded for a while then gave up. "If you want me I'll be in my office."

"I'll remember that." Julian remarked significantly.

The Peninsula holiday house was developing well. The multiple bedroom residence was arranged around a large kidney shaped swimming pool which led onto a garden surrounded by a circle of pencil pines. The curving lines of the pool were repeated inside the house. He thought of using feature walls to create texture. Huge windows would look out over the sea.

He worked for several hours before putting it aside and returning upstairs.

When he returned to the kitchen Julian couldn't wipe the smile off his face. Ben decided not to tackle him about the surprise and ate his lunch in silence.

"O.K.," said Julian, "you win. I've got tickets to the theatre for your birthday."

"Wow!" Ben knew these tickets were expensive. "I'm delighted. I know how hard they are to get."

"They're for the premier!"

"Really! How did you manage that?" Ben was genuinely surprised.

"James got them. He knows someone at the Arts Center."

"Gosh." Ben blushed. "I'm flattered."

Julian was getting a real kick out of his surprise.

"It's Friday night isn't it?" Ben was vague.

"Yes. On your actual birthday. How's that!"

"Sounds terrific."

Ben kissed him and gave him a bear hug. "Should I dress?"

"You certainly should. It's the premier - everyone who's anyone will be there."

"I'm sure they will." Ben didn't consider himself to be anyone. "Do you want a new outfit?"

"Yes please." Julian liked dressing up.

"We'll go to Toorak Village there's a nice shop there."

"O.K.." He went to get ready.

Julian chose a very expensive silk and wool suit in a subdued dark green. The pure cotton shirt was offset by a plain green tie. Ben was surprised by how conservatively Julian dressed but he always looked immaculate.

Ben himself chose an apple green silk suit which Julian liked, mainly because it was by a famous designer and cost a small fortune. The pink and green paisley tie made Julian nervous but Ben liked the way it went with the pale pink shirt.

"We'll match." He quipped.

Julian smiled like the Cheshire cat. All this was too much. It would be a triumph.

Friday arrived and Ben spent the morning meditating on turning fifty.

Robert rang at about 11:00 am.

“Happy birthday Benny.”

Ben thanked him then apologized for not ringing. Robert was still well and had remembered Ben’s birthday – that was a good sign. Ben told him about the theatre and their plans for that evening.

“Sounds great. Have a good night.”

Ben promised to ring and said goodbye.

Bronwyn arrived with a present for Ben. It was a horoscope which she had constructed herself. Like everything else Bronwyn did it was over the top – thirty pages with charts and interpretations.

Ben thanked her and invited her to stay for lunch. Julian didn’t believe in astrology but he seemed curious about the colorful document.

“So how does it feel to be fifty?” Bronwyn enquired cheekily.

They were sitting down to a healthy lunch at the kitchen table. Julian was munching on his salad sandwich.

“It doesn’t feel bad at all actually.” Ben reassured her. “As you can imagine I’ve been thinking quite a bit about that this morning.”

“I can imagine.” She retorted.

“I’ve decided it’s good. I feel better in fact.”

“Better? That’s interesting. Your progressed moon is in Capricorn. That makes you age well.”

“Capricorn? Does it?” Ben didn’t have any idea what that meant. “I’ll leave it to tomorrow to read the horoscope, when I’ve got more time. Julian’s taking me out tonight.”

“Ooh goody,’ crooned Bronwyn, “Where?”

“To the theatre.”

“It’s the premier.” Put in Julian.

“How.....?”

“A friend at work.”

“Work?”

“*The Anti-Violence Group.*”

“You are well connected. Of course Libra – you’re a Libra Horse – always like to socialize.”

“Horse?”

“Chinese astrology. It goes by the year. 1966 was the year of the Fire Horse.”

“What am I then?” enquired Ben.

“1958 – the year of the Earth Dog. So you’re a Virgo Dog.”

“A Dog is that good?”

“Very faithful and reliable.”

“And how do Virgo Dogs get on with Libra Horses.” Asked Julian.

“Well Libra and Virgo are not a natural match but Julian has his moon in Virgo which is good with Ben’s Virgo sun. Dogs and horses get on famously – a cozy crusade.”

“That sounds like us” concluded Ben.

“It’s all in the horoscope. I did some synastry with Julian’s chart which might help.’

‘Synastry.....good.” Ben nodded knowingly.

“I should have brought a cake.” Bronwyn was always in a hurry and often forgot things, which she regretted later.

“I think there’s some ice cream in the fridge.” Julian suggested.

“You can’t put candles on ice cream it will melt.” Ben was deadpan.

Julian laughed out loud. He loved Ben’s sense of humor.

“You know when you die it’s comments like that I’ll remember.” He said.

Ben looked bemused. He didn’t seem to understand his own joke.

Bronwyn stayed a while talking about her fairs and tarot readings. She left them plenty of time to get ready for their big evening.

They ate early and then left for the city. Ben drove and parked the car in the huge Art’s Center car park. There were so many entrances and levels that Ben worried that he might get lost. He parked as close to the theatre entrance as he could.

The foyer of the State Theatre was already bustling with theatre goers when Ben and Julian arrived. They couldn’t see anyone they knew at first so they stood near the entrance and watched the colorful crowd.

Ben bought a program which Julian immediately commandeered to look at the photographs. It was nearly all advertising.

At about 8:00 pm. The *glitterati* began to arrive. There were several television personalities that Ben recognized and a well known ballet dancer. A famous rock star alighted from a black stretch limousine. He was dressed in black with a jacket covered in glittering skulls. His t-shirt sported a red heart pierced by a dagger dripping blood. His partner wore a full length black gown which accentuated her considerable cleavage. Their entourage all wore black, some adorned with indecipherable gothic script.

“They look like something out of a vampire movie,” was Ben’s comment.

“Don’t be such a scaredy cat,” Julian teased him, “They’re just rock musicians.”

Ben remembered Philip Newberry's letter and felt a little uncomfortable. They certainly looked the part.

The bells rang and everyone moved towards the entrance to the theatre.

Ben and Julian had center stalls – prime seats. After a few minutes they were joined by a man in his thirties and his young Asian partner. Julian introduced James Theodore and Chen Lee. James was slim and swarthy. His partner Chen was fine, delicate and shy.

The lights dimmed and the overture began. The deep, somber notes transported Ben back to his childhood. He had seen the play when he was quite young. In fact, it had been his first excursion to the theatre. He had fallen in love with it – the costumes, the sets, the lights. He loved the music and begged his father to buy him the record which he duly did for his birthday. That record had been played over and over until he knew the words by heart. It was a long time ago now. He hadn't heard it for years.

During intermission they all went out to the foyer. Smokers rushed for the doors. Neither Ben nor Julian smoked so that was not a problem. Ben noticed that the rock star was keeping company with a well known footballer.

"Isn't that...." Ben prompted.

"Yes it is." Julian looked at Ben dubiously. "Now don't start getting paranoid on me."

Ben was taken aback by Julian's blunt remark and didn't reply.

They were joined by James and Chen.

"How are you finding this production?" James asked Ben.

"I'm thoroughly enjoying it thank you." Ben replied.

"It's not every day you turn fifty." James smiled charmingly.

"I don't know how I should take that?" Ben laughed it off.

"Take it as a compliment," James' retorted.

Ben felt happier now that he had met James' partner Chen. Julian had spoken of James with such enthusiasm that Ben had felt quite anxious. James and Chen appeared quite happy together, however, and Ben decided he was worrying about nothing.

Ben asked Chen, who must have been half his age, whereabouts in China he came from.

"Beijing." He replied. "My family has lived there for five hundred years but it is no good being gay in China. It's not like Australia."

"No." Julian frowned. He had always been anti-communist.

Ben didn't want to get into an argument so he changed the subject. Julian had told him that Chen had been a student and had met James at one of the gay venues.

"And where did you study?" He queried.

"Melbourne Uni.. I studied law."

Ben was impressed. He had studied architecture at Melbourne himself but before he had a chance to compare experiences the bells sounded and they all moved back to their seats.

Afterwards Ben gracefully declined James' offer of drinks claiming tiredness and they took their leave. He found the car without any trouble.

As they drove home Ben found himself humming the tunes from the play. Julian was quiet but seemed well pleased with his evening.

That night their lovemaking was tender and slow. Julian was particularly attentive and Ben felt warm and affectionate.

"I do love you, you know." Julian confessed.

"I'm glad." Ben responded by bringing their union to a blissful climax.

Ben spent Saturday quietly recovering while Julian surfed the Net.

On Sunday Ben went to Church as usual and said a prayer for Robert during the silences in the prayers of intercession.

The scripture for the day was "I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it".(GNB)

Ben felt the relevance of this after his night at the theatre. He had become like a little child.

Isabel spoke eloquently on innocence and cynicism. They sang a hymn which Isabel knew would take many back to Sunday school days.

So Ben was feeling quite happy when, after the service, he caught sight of Philip Newberry. He waved and Philip came over at once.

"I got your letter." Ben began.

Philip was silent, wary.

"I found it very interesting, shocking really." Ben hesitated. "There's something I wanted to ask you though."

"What's that ?" Philip seemed to relax – he was open to questions.

“Well, I had this dream after I read the letter. I was holding the letter and a voice said, ‘What he says is true but there is no Satan’. I wondered how that could be and the voice said ‘explanations’ meaning like explanations of life.....” Ben trailed off vaguely.

“I see.” Philip paused for a moment while he thought it over. “I don’t really believe in the Devil either but that doesn’t mean that there are not people who do and act accordingly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just because there is no Satan doesn’t mean there are no Satanists.”

“I hadn’t thought of that, thank you.”

“Sometimes I think It’s a bit like the description of the beast in the Bible – they act as if there is a Satan or a beast which isn’t real but their crimes remain.”

“*Revelation 17.*”

“Yes. They’re right into the beast and 666 and all that.”

“I can imagine!” Ben’s mind was reeling. “But if there is no Satan,” he reasoned, “how can they affect you, by what power?”

“They develop psychic powers by practicing yoga and taking drugs and they usurp power by black magic. Power is their thing really, anything that creates power they want.”

“I see.”

“Does that help?”

“Yes it does.” Ben replied. ‘I’ve had a couple of things happen actually that back you up.’ He was thinking of Friday night.

“Good. I prayed for that.”

“I feel quite privileged that you have confided in me.” Ben was genuinely flattered.

“When you know about something like that you don’t feel as if you can keep it a secret.”

“No I don’t suppose you do.....” Ben wasn’t sure where this was leading. “Would you like to come over for dinner one night.” He had said it before realizing.

Philip looked surprised and smiled. “Sure. A weekend though. I work early during the week.”

‘How about next Saturday night.’

“Saturday. O.K..”

Ben gave him the address and telephone number. “About 7:00 pm?”

“Thanks.”

Ben took his leave and went out to the car. He wasn’t sure why he had asked Philip over but he wasn’t disappointed. No one at St. Aiden’s had ever asked him to dinner in all the years he had been going there. Perhaps people were embarrassed about his sexuality and

the presence of Julian would set that off. He didn't know if other couples socialized. It seemed unlikely.

When he arrived home Robert was waiting for him on the doorstep. He hadn't been game to ring the doorbell. He looked nervous and scared. Ben showed him in and took him into the ground floor study. Ben always found the study restful.

"Sit down."

Robert sat in one of the leather chairs. Ben sat opposite him.

"So what's gone wrong Robby?"

"I've had more voices, demonic voices." Robert sounded defensive as if Ben might not believe him.

"Saying what?"

"Tricking me - saying they're God then turning on me." He began to fidget. "It's all rather classical really – temptation then Hell."

"Did they give any reason this time?"

"Because I'm vain..... and left."

"Left? What do you mean left."

"On God's left hand, like bad."

"In what way?"

"Well, masturbation and stuff and left-wing."

"Left wing?"

"Yes."

Robert looked frightened and agitated. He didn't seem to be able to keep still.

"Did you take your medication?"

"Yes, I took a full tablet before I left home."

"Did you come on the tram?"

"Yes."

Ben recalled what Kath had said about Robert's voices and wondered what he should say. Suddenly he remembered the letter from Philip Newberry. He took a punt. "Do you still listen to rock music?"

"Rock music? Well, yes, why?"

"Some people say that rock music has a negative spiritual effect on you." Ben was cautious.

"On the unconscious level."

"Backtracking you mean?"

“You’ve heard of it then.”

“Yes..... rumors.”

Ben went to the desk and found Philip’s letter. “Now I don’t want you to take this too seriously if it doesn’t seem right.....” He handed Robert the letter.

Robert read through the letter. As he read he slowly began to smile. “This is the only thing that I’ve heard that sounds like what happens to me!”

“You don’t think there could be a link?” Ben was hopeful.

“Could be.” Robert looked optimistic.

Ben had a brainwave. “I have some classical music I could give you. Would you be prepared to try that instead?”

“Stop listening to rock altogether you mean?”

“Yes, altogether. Call it a control experiment.” Ben was firm.

Robert was beginning to relax – this was something he could do. “I don’t think it could do any harm to try it.” He said.

“I agree.” Ben concluded. “Do you want a drink or something, or would you like to stay?”

“I won’t stay long. A coffee would be nice.”

They quit the library and went upstairs for coffee. While Robert was occupied Ben searched his C.D. collection and selected half a dozen that might be suitable. He gave these to Robert.

“New territory for me really.”

“I hope it helps.”

Ben drove Robert home and saw him in before leaving. As he drove home he said a prayer. He was gambling on the classical music. It wasn’t really orthodox but he couldn’t see any harm in it. At the very least it would be more restful.

At home once more he told Julian about inviting Philip Newberry to dinner the next Saturday night.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Julian frowned.

“I’ve already done it.”

“Can I ask someone then?”

“Of course. Who did you have in mind?”

“There’s a kid at work. He’s gay and his parents threw him out. He was living on the streets when James met him at the club. He gave the kid a job at the *Anti-Violence Group*. Sort of office boy.”

“How old is he?”

“Sixteen. His name is Daniel Jacobson.”

On the desk was a paper that Isabel had given Ben for the monthly discussion group which met on the first Thursday of each month at St. Aiden's. Today was Tuesday so Ben thought he had better get on and read it.

The paper was entitled *The Heart of the Matter*. The author was Martin Day an American liberal theologian who was becoming quite well known for his radical insights. He was also gay.

Ben sat down and began to read.

In the end life is more about the condition of your heart than the state of your mind.

When asked which was the most important commandment Jesus answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”(GNB), then added “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.”(GNB)

So it is clear that Jesus considered the way of the heart to be the path to God. Far more important than any merely intellectual assent given to dubious propositions about a Christ or His virgin mother.

Jesus never made statements about his own status or that of his mother in life. These were added later as mythology similar to the fabulous stories that grew up around the Buddha and other prominent religious figures of history. The elaborate Christology which we see in the Gospel of John was not written until 100 years after the birth of Jesus.

Others have documented these matters extensively so I do not intend to go into them here.

It has been said that there are only two things in the world : Love and Fear.

In the Old Testament we are told to fear God. I believe that the word which is translated as “fear” really means to “respect”. How different the world would have been had the translators of the Bible used the word “respect” instead of “fear”. To respect God is to love God not to fear God.

There is no fear in the presence of God. How many times does it say “Fear not” in the Bible. In his letter the author of 1 John writes, “There is no fear in love; perfect love drives out all fear”.(GNB) As our fear decreases so our love increases.

Jesus says, “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you”.(GNB) He says that God is our father. God is also the father of our enemies but God does not adjudicate.

In *Matthew* 25 we meet the right and the left, the sheep and the goats, the blessed and the damned but I believe that God is a reconciling God. The parables of reconciliation are the lost penny, the lost sheep, and the lost son. God seeks to reconcile even the most wayward souls to the very last one. “*Satan*” is God’s prodigal son and he is loved as God loves Jesus and the *saints*.

A father does not condemn his own children.

What is at the heart of family values? What is it that is different in families from the wider community? It is the love which a parent has for his or her children that makes the difference. If God is our father then all people, good or evil, are our brothers and sisters.

The objective is not to treat our family like we treat everyone else but to treat everyone like a family member.

If you love only your friends “have you done anything out of the ordinary?”(GNB)

This may offend our ideas of natural justice – rewards for good behavior and punishment for bad behavior – but in the end natural justice is a human construct. God is our father and patient “because he does not want anyone to be destroyed”.(GNB)

Tears melt the heart. When we feel compassion for someone, even an enemy, we overcome our hard-heartedness (which is our fear) and show love for another.

To forgive those who abuse us even as they are causing us pain is the most difficult of tasks. God asks only that we try. We may be surprised.

To do these things is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Those footsteps may lead to the cross.

How much better are we who fear to offend God than those who blame God? We try to please God out of fear. We try to be perfect. Those who blame God may be more honest than us. The ledger will never balance, “the one who was forgiven more” (GNB) “will love him more” (GNB).

So perhaps instead of making judgments about who is *good* and who is *evil* we should concentrate on making someone’s life better than it was before.

This is the message of love that Jesus heard from God. May we hear that message?

Amen.

Ben put the paper down.

This was at once challenging and exciting. It was certainly radical theology. He wondered what the others had made of it. He would soon find out.

The discussion group was held in the *quiet room* which was adjacent to the church hall. Isabel had arranged some hyacinths on a small table in the middle of a circle of chairs.

Because the group was held during the day most of the participants were older women but a few retired ministers also attended.

Isabel began by giving a short summary of Martin Day’s history. He had been an ordained minister in an American Church but now made his living as a full time theologian. He had written several books and was a leading exponent of *queer* theology.

Silence followed so Isabel prompted, “Day certainly affirms the centrality of the gospel of love above ideas of Christology. What do people think about that?”

“Well,” Colin, one of the retired ministers, spoke up, “I think all of us here are familiar with his position. We have studied the background several times with other theologians. I expect that most of us would agree with him.”

There were nods around the group.

“I don’t think any progressives would still uphold the Fall/Redemption model of Christianity.” Beth was confident.

“We’ll move on then” said Isabel. “There are some quite confronting statements made in the article. The first I think is the discussion of the translation of the word for *fear* of God as *respect* for God.”

“Yes,” Marion piped up, “that was wonderful. What a relief not to have to fear God.”

“I believe that others have said something similar.” John was the most conservative of the ex-ministers. He seemed a little put out by the unconventionality of the views being put forward but was curious about them none the less.

“I think he says there are two things in the world – love and fear. I’ve heard that before somewhere, does anyone know where it comes from?” Margery was shy but the group was not threatening so she felt free to express her thoughts.

No one knew who had said it originally but several of them had heard it before.

“It certainly simplifies things,” put in Jennifer, “but is it Christian?”

“Well,” Isabel retorted, rather defensively, “I think we can say it’s not un-Christian.”

Before Isabel could continue Doris butted in. “Satan is God’s prodigal son is un-Christian. Doesn’t this man know his Bible? Satan’s fate is clearly stated in *Revelation*. The fire awaits both Satan and his angels!” she pronounced.

“It is in inverted commas.” Ben spoke for the first time.

“What does that mean?” Doris was irate.

“I think it means,” explained Ben, “that we call people we disagree with Satan.”

Doris was going a deeper shade of purple. She seemed unable to speak.

“His comment about family values was encouraging.” Helen’s cool voice defused the tension. “There’s so little agreement between liberals and conservatives. I thought that love being the point of meeting was quite helpful.”

There was a silence.

“There are many unfamiliar concepts,” Isabel continued, “in this original piece and not all of them will meet with our agreement.” She paused meaningfully. “For example he challenges the concept of judgement by God.”

“Yes,” Sandra piped up, “I’ve always felt intuitively that God is not judgmental. It seems so out of character if you believe in a loving God.” Sandra was the youngest member of the group. She was from a different generation.

“I’ve always believed that God is my judge,” said Colin, “and that has been my motivation.” Isabel looked surprised but soldiered on. “He goes on to say that thinking we are good is a bit conceited.”

No one spoke. Several people shifted uncomfortably in their chairs.

Unexpectedly David, another ex-minister, spoke up. “That’s more true than we realize. I’ve dealt with many people over the years and I found that some people I knew who were atheists were better Christians than my flock.”

Ben nodded thoughtfully.

“‘Tears melt the heart’ - that’s lovely. Compassion for others’ suffering is the thing which really makes our love grow.” Rose was over eighty, quiet but brave. She often surprised Ben with her insightful comments.

“I think that’s a good place to finish” sighed Isabel. “Thanks to everyone for their contributions.”

“Thank you Isabel” echoed several people.

Ben helped put the chairs away and received a flower for his trouble. He wondered if Isabel knew the myth of *Hyacinthus - Apollo’s* male lover - he decided that she did.

“How did you find Martin Day?” Isabel asked Ben as the others were leaving.

“Very good.”

“You know he’s gay of course.”

“Yes.”

“He claims to have spoken with God I believe.” Isabel looked at him warily.

“Really!”

“I have a book of his that you might like. I’ll bring it on Sunday if you’re interested.”

“I am. Thank you.” Ben smiled.

As he was driving home Ben’s mind was racing. The discussion group had been extremely stimulating, more so than he had expected. Was it possible to believe these things and still

be a Christian? Could you reject the orthodox doctrines of the Church and still be a member? It was a challenge to Church unity. Would it cause a split?

'How was the discussion group?' Asked Julian as Ben slumped onto the green couch.

"Very good," replied Ben rather defensively, "Doris found it a bit challenging but overall it was very positive."

"What were you talking about?" Julian was curious despite himself.

"Jesus teaching of love as opposed to orthodox doctrines like the fall and judgment."

"I thought you had to believe all that stuff to be called a Christian."

"It would seem not."

When Saturday came Ben and Julian spent the afternoon preparing for their dinner party.

Ben was cooking his specialty - chicken with broccoli – and Julian made his chocolate mousse. They worked side by side in silence, both lost in thought.

Philip Newberry arrived at about 6:30 pm apologizing for being early. They sat together in the upstairs lounge room as the sun set in the west. Ben drew the rose curtains and the doorbell rang.

Daniel Jacobson was slight and small but his body was beautifully proportioned and he had the face of an angel. Julian introduced him. Philip seemed nervous but Daniel was confident, almost brash.

Over dinner in the main dining room Ben was polite and asked Daniel about his work and accommodation.

"Daniel's parents were *Born Again Christians*.' Julian was blunt. "They lived in Bendigo. They said Jesus could not accept Daniel's sexuality and God had rejected him."

"I see," said Ben, "Well I am a Christian myself," he wasn't about to let this pass, "and I can say categorically that God has not rejected you. It takes a long time for gay people to realize that we are right and everyone else is wrong but I can assure you that this is the case." He paused. "As for Jesus – "Let he among you who is without sin cast the first stone".

Daniel relaxed and smiled.

"I'm not gay myself," offered Philip, "but there are many Christians, especially in our Church, who accept homosexuals and affirm their acceptance by God."

“Call it a second opinion.” Ben concluded.

Julian was watching Daniel to see how he reacted. He seemed satisfied.

“So what do you do Philip?” Daniel enquired.

“I used to be a rock musician,” he looked at Ben, “but now I’m working as a baker in a hot bread shop.”

“Hence ‘I work early.’” Ben smiled.

“It’s quite hard physically but I’m petty fit so that doesn’t bother me.”

Ben was pleased. His dinner party was going quite well despite the diversity of his guests and the fact that they didn’t know each other at all.

After dinner they retired to the lounge room and Ben offered them drinks. Ben didn’t drink himself but always kept a small supply for visitors. Julian had been known to raid the drink cupboard on occasion but he wasn’t a regular drinker. Philip declined but Julian and Daniel had brandies.

“Should we have some music do you think or will it stifle conversation?” Ben looked at Julian. “Perhaps not.” Philip looked nervous.

Ben was curious about Daniel’s experiences but didn’t want to alarm him.

“Have you made many friends in Melbourne?” He enquired awkwardly.

“A few. You meet people on the streets - gangs etc. - but not many families. I’ve met more adults since working with Julian and James.”

Daniel was sweet. He seemed genuinely grateful for his employment and connections. Julian liked him, Ben could tell, but he was a bit young even for Julian who was curious about his young friends.

“Most kids on the street,” Daniel continued, “have sex for money. They don’t know how else to live,” he was matter of fact, “but I never needed to because I met James.”

Ben wondered if this was strictly true, “I hope you can find a new life here in Melbourne.” He said. “Julian and I are always here if you need us.”

Julian nodded agreement.

“Philip used to work in rock, didn’t you.” Ben continued. “Did you want to say anything to Daniel about that?”

Philip hadn’t mentioned his past but spoke up now as if he had been waiting for an opening in the conversation.

“I left the music industry because I had a very negative experience there – a negative spiritual experience.” He paused.

Daniel looked curious.

“There is a lot of black magic and Satanism in the music business,” Philip continued, “and I was virtually attacked!”

To their surprise Daniel replied, “There’s a lot of that on the streets. The gangs are mostly Satanic. I was approached by one.”

Ben could see that Daniel was vulnerable after his experience with Christianity.

“But it didn’t really interest me,” Daniel went on, “and then I met James.”

He didn’t say whether there had been any intimacy with James but Ben knew that Julian suspected that there had been.

“James and Chen have been together for three years but they have occasional flings.” Julian blurted out rather tactlessly.

Daniel blushed.

“Philip comes to church with me at St. Aiden’s,” Ben came to the rescue, “I don’t suppose that would interest you Daniel.”

“Not at the moment. I’m off Church after my parents.”

“Of course, but we are there if you’re interested later on.” Ben knew that people who had been brought up with religion sometimes returned to it after a break and he wanted to offer Daniel an alternative to fundamentalism.

“Yes,” said Philip enthusiastically, “St. Aiden’s is excellent, not at all judgmental. Isabel, our minister, is quite open minded. I was surprised.” He hesitated. “But of course you’re not ready. I didn’t mean to pressure you.”

Julian piped up, “Enough about Church. What football team do you barrack for?”

Everyone laughed. Julian followed Hawthorn but was open to anyone who accepted gay men. Daniel was a Collingwood supporter.

“I used to barrack for the Demons but now I barrack for the Saints” was Philip’s comment.

Ben didn’t follow the football but had a vague connection with Richmond.

The rest of the evening was spent in pleasant conversation and Ben and Julian showed their guests out about 10:30 pm. Philip offered to drive Daniel home. He accepted gratefully.

“That went well.” Julian was pleased.

“Yes, I wasn’t sure where it was going a couple of times there....”

“I know what you mean.”

They finished clearing up and Julian decided to sleep in his own room. Ben didn’t object, he was tired himself and slept like a log.

The next day was Sunday and Ben went to Church.

Isabel seldom followed the lectionary. She had chosen a pair of related readings for the day. The first was the parable of the wedding banquet in which a father makes a feast for his son's marriage but the invited guests will not come. The man then sends his servants out into the streets to invite anyone who will come. The second reading was the marriage of Cana where Jesus turns the water into wine.

In her sermon she spoke about the significance of the meal in ancient cultures, not only in relation to hospitality customs but also as a sacrament. Some of the ancient mystery cults had ended their dark night ordeals with a joyous morning meal which symbolized their union with the god.

The Hebrew tribes had also had symbolic meals like the Passover and the manna from heaven and Christianity had the Eucharist. Ben wondered if she knew that the Eucharist went back to the *Cult of Dionysus* who was eaten by the *Titans*.

"So when we are invited to eat at God's table," she concluded, "we are not just sharing a meal but are entering into a covenant with God."

After the service he spoke briefly to Philip then Isabel motioned him over.

"I have that book for you." She smiled and handed him a hardback book.

Ben glanced at the title – *The Chambers of the Heart*.

"That's good," she said, "it's full of original insights."

Ben thanked her and, deciding against a discussion of *Dionysus*, left for the car park. He did not want to talk to people today he wanted to get home and read his book.

The Chambers of the Heart had much in common with the article that Ben had read for the discussion group.

There was no judgment, personal or collective, and no Hell. The afterlife was like the scenario put forward by mediums who said that souls that have passed were with their relatives and friends on the other side. Martin Day suggested that this was according to

love which was the organizing principle of the universe. The attractive power which was responsible for the formation of stars was love.

Unlike most Eastern philosophers he said that the soul was located in the heart not the mind. The heart mediated between the personality or ego and the spirit. The mind and the sexual energies flowed from the heart not vice-versa.

Day proposed that when you loved God you drew close to God and began to see. This was spiritual knowledge and it was all about love.

Again and again he returned to the Biblical injunction to love God and to love others and Jesus words about loving your enemies and those who abuse you.

Finally he quoted Theresa of Avila who had said that the marriage with God took place in the seventh dwelling place, the innermost chamber.

With this *The Chambers of the Heart* ended.

Ben was dumbstruck. He had never heard these things before, and Martin Day was gay!

During the week Ben went to visit Robert. He had deliberately not contacted Robert since giving him the classical C.D.s. It was over a week now and they should be able to gauge any effect. He took with him several C.D.s for Robert to try out if the verdict was positive.

“So how are you then?”

“Good. The demonic voices are nearly gone! I haven’t listened to any rock music since I saw you so the difference can only be the music.” He paused. “As soon as I started listening to the classical music I had more supportive voices which is not a problem. In fact it helps.”

Ben was intrigued. “Which ones did you find the most helpful?”

Robert thought for a moment. “The sacred music is the best. It creates a sort of spiritual atmosphere – sympathetic, like angels – rather than the constant abuse I usually get. Some of the romantics are nice but it’s a bit tempestuous.”

“Good. I’ve brought some more. The baroque seems to be the most helpful and that’s mostly choral music. I have some renaissance music as well, there’s more if you want them.”

“Someone suggested baroque. So I went to the store to look for it. They had some masses.”

“I think I have some at home which you might like. Who suggested it?”

“A girl at the drop in center. I go there sometimes when I haven’t seen anyone for a while. She said it straight away when I mentioned sacred music.”

Ben couldn’t believe the difference in Robert. He was going to say that he was almost normal but thought better of it. “You’re much improved in any case. I think we should keep it up.”

“I think so too.”

Ben gave Robert a huge bear hug and left him smiling like a cherubim.

Robert himself seemed unaware of how much better he was. He knew, however, that his improvement had to do with the music.

Ben wondered whether visual stimuli had the same effect. It was more difficult to determine what was helpful and what was not. He would think about it.

A couple of weeks later Julian arrived home holding up two tickets.

“Tickets to the Grand Final!” He announced jubilantly.

“Where did you get those?”

“James got them courtesy of the AFL. He said I could have them seeing as Hawthorn’s playing.”

“Good. Who will you take?”

“Well you’re not really interested so I thought I might take Daniel.”

“That’s fine with me.”

Saturday arrived and Julian set off sporting his yellow and brown scarf.

Ben watched on television and became more and more enthralled as the game went on. Geelong was a red hot favorite to win its second final in a row but kicked poorly for goal and the young Hawthorn team drew away. At half time everyone still expected Geelong to win but some were becoming nervous. As the second half progressed it became obvious that Geelong was not going to catch up and when the siren went Hawthorn was still well in front. The underdogs had beaten the champions!

Julian arrived home in a state of high excitement. Even he had not expected Hawthorn to win!

That night their celebratory sex was passionate and delirious. Ben could only imagine what Julian was thinking. After a terrific climax Julian crashed to earth and collapsed exhausted. He fell asleep at once.

The discussion group for October was based on a sermon by Bernard Simpson a liberal minister from the United States. The title was *Poetic Justice – a modern interpretation of the Bible*.

He put forward the idea that the Bible should not be interpreted literally or scientifically but as poetry or metaphor. He wrote extensively about the Jewish tradition of *midrash* which was the practice of echoing or referring to older stories or passages of scripture as the basis of a new story.

He also suggested that the overwhelming message of the prophets was not one of morality or fear of God but a strong sense of social justice.

The New Testament, he said, was a continuation of these traditions. Many of the stories about Jesus reflected stories in the Old Testament and Jesus message of social justice was in keeping with the Old Testament prophets.

Isabel had asked Colin to lead the group for the month. This was a new idea - to rotate the leadership of the group.

"The piece we are discussing," Colin began, "is a sermon by Bernard Simpson called *Poetic Justice*. The first point that he makes is that the Bible is poetry or metaphor. How do people feel about this?"

"I found it a little bit strange at first" put in Marion. "We are so used to thinking of the Gospels as eye-witness reports - like the news – but the more I thought about it the more obvious it became. People in the ancient world weren't objective like modern scientists. Objective reporting is a modern idea. So poetry, myth, and metaphor seemed natural. Certainly this was practiced in other ancient cultures."

"Yes" responded Beth. "Think of Homer or Vyasa!"

"The ancient cultures," pronounced John, "were very much oral cultures. It was only after hundreds of years that myths and histories were written down."

Ben wanted to say something about his Indian studies but didn't get a chance.

“The storyteller in the market place.” Helen was childlike. “You think of *The Arabian Nights*.”

“It’s hard to get used to,” said Doris, “but it does make some sense.”

Colin moved on to the practice of midrash. Most of the group had heard this word before but not all of them understood it. David attempted to explain. “*Midrash* is a traditional idea. It is not new or speculative. It was common to refer to older stories. The flight to Egypt for example in *Matthew* is a recalling of the sojourn in Egypt of the Hebrew people in *Genesis* and *Exodus*.”

Several people moved uncomfortably in their seats. This was new to some of them.

“The more you read the Bible in this light,” said Jennifer, “the more it seems true.”

“One of the Jewish scholars says that nothing Jesus says in the New Testament is original. It all comes from the Hebrew scriptures.” Margery added.

“Good.” Concluded Colin. “So what do people think about *Justice*. Is social justice the message of the prophets?”

Doris said she thought that moral obedience to God was the message of the prophets.

Helen thought it was history.

Ben commented that if you looked hard enough those messages were there : the fatherless, the widow, the stranger – all were to be respected. This was not immediately apparent however.

“What do you think about Jesus?” Colin continued. “Is he a prophet of social justice?”

“Definitely in my view.” Marion was firm.

John said. “One of the American evangelical ministers told his flock that anything with the word justice in it was morally suspect and opposed to God.”

Nervous laughter.

Jean, who was attending for the first time, said. “It’s certainly interesting to look at the New Testament in that light.”

With this Colin brought the discussion to a close. Several people thanked him for his leadership and the group tidied up.

Ben hadn’t said much but he was interested in how individuals reacted. They seemed to be quite positive. The idea that the Bible was not intended to be taken literally had changed his life. No longer did he have to dread the words of terror : Sodom, abomination, burn..... Now he could discard them as the words of ignorant men, men who lacked a deeper understanding. They were no longer the words of God.

Julian decided that they would watch an episode of a famous science fiction movie series on the big screen in the lounge room.

Julian was a big fan but Ben had begun to feel uncomfortable about the violence. Somehow it didn't seem right.

He decided that he would speak to Philip Newberry about it.

Ben gave him a ring the following day. Philip was home and they made a time to meet that afternoon at a local café.

When Philip arrived Ben was already half way through his coffee.

'Sorry I'm late.' Philip flopped down in the chair. "What was it you wanted to ask me."

"I was wondering," Ben began, "what you thought about" he named the science fiction movie. "The approach to evil I mean. It always seems to me that the violence is wrong somehow. I thought that you might have thought about this with your past....." Ben trailed off.

"When you first encounter evil the instinctive reaction is to fight against it. To battle and destroy it," he paused, "but it doesn't work. You never get anywhere doing that.

"When I came to Church I looked more closely at the teachings of Jesus and , as you know, he says to love your enemies, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you.

"Since I was getting nowhere I decided to change my approach - to project love towards the source of evil and pray for those who were attacking me.

"To my surprise it began to work. I can't say that I was totally free of it, that didn't happen until I stopped the rock music altogether, but it was better. Does that make any sense?"

"It does make sense." Ben replied. "I had never really thought of it that way before. Evil always seems to be treated differently in the Bible but you're right about Jesus teaching, I had just never realized that it referred to evil."

"You have to lay down the sword." Philip was certain.

"I see," said Ben, "and if you're right that cancels out the sword in other passages like Revelation. Jesus words always take precedence when there is a contradiction in my view."

"I hope that helps." Philip offered.

"I'm sure it will."

When he arrived home Ben went around the house and removed all the weapons : the *samurai* swords in his bedroom, the statue of Mars with his spear, his Gandalf with sword and staff, the antique pistols in the study.....

He said a prayer for Philip and he said a prayer for Robert. He prayed for people around the world who were suffering. He was changing and the world was changing around him.

Julian arrived home with grim news. One of Daniel's young friends had committed suicide. He had been gay and bullied at school, his parents had disowned him and he had killed himself.

"How is Daniel taking it?" asked Ben.

"He was very upset on the phone." Julian had taken the call. "James has given him time off."

"I'm sorry to hear about it."

"You don't realize Ben. You grew up before AIDS. It's not like that now." Julian was angry. "Kids are cruel! They hate gay people."

Ben was silent.

"The suicide rate for gay people is four times that of straight people and homelessness is even higher!"

"What can we do?"

"James has written to the Education Minister again. She won't allow gay sex education. It's too risky."

"Parents complain."

"Let them complain. If it saves lives it's worth it. Why shouldn't we have gay sex education anyway. What's wrong with it? We're not invisible any more Ben! We're not non-existent. We're citizens like everyone else and we have to demand our rights."

Julian was hurt, he took this personally and his frustration showed.

Ben made their dinner and they ate in silence. He didn't know what to say to Julian. He knew what suicide was like - he had felt that way himself - but that didn't help Julian or Daniel.

After clearing up Ben and Julian sat together on the couch wrapped in each other's arms. Ben opened his heart and comforted Julian. Hot tears welled up in Julian's dark eyes and

he wept like a child. All the pent up anger and pain came pouring out and he buried his head in Ben's chest. They stayed like this for a long time before Ben suggested that they retire early.

Before he slept Ben asked God to bless gay people and help to make life better for young gays.

When he went to Church the following day Ben asked Isabel to include something for Daniel's friend in the prayers. He had discretely asked Julian the boy's name.

Ben was distracted and worried. He barely heard the sermon which was "There are many rooms in my Father's house."(GNB)

".....and we pray for Daniel Jacobson and his young gay friend Christopher Bell who has committed suicide because of the hatred and rejection of the community."

There was a tense silence.

Ben felt tears coming to his eyes.

Afterwards Beth asked him about Daniel. She had guessed that it was Ben who had requested the prayer.

"Thank you Beth. Julian works with him. He was very upset."

"I can understand that. It seems so unjust."

"People don't realize." Ben stammered. "You get rejected. Young people are homophobic. It's AIDS I suppose."

"Were his family religious?"

"I don't know. The fundamentalists don't help. One of the American Churches had a *Hell House* for children that showed gay people who had died of AIDS tormented in Hell."

"Fun for kids." Beth was disgusted.

"Thank you for asking anyway."

Ben looked at her but decided not to say too much. The response of the religious community to AIDS had been disgraceful. If anyone had ever needed Jesus help it was gay men with AIDS and what did they do? They sent them to Hell!

No one else enquired so Ben went home feeling dejected and sad. At least Isabel had said something but it was just not enough.

The funeral was held the following Tuesday. Julian said he wanted to go and Ben decided to go with him.

The memorial was in a small chapel at the funeral parlor. There were a few young people there including Daniel. They were crying and hugging each other. James and Chen came and Julian and Ben. Christopher's parents did not come.

After a short introduction and some music which Ben did not recognize Daniel spoke about his friend.

"Christopher was the best friend you could have. He was always sympathetic and willing to listen.

"I knew him from school where he would terrorize the locker room. He made no secret of his homosexuality and more than once earned a black eye for it. He wore those black eyes like trophies!

"When his parents made him leave home he had nowhere to go. He couldn't face living on the streets and I know that he rang several people but none of them would help. No one would put him up."

The young people in the front had started quietly to weep

"There was no suicide note because there was no one to read it. Christopher was utterly alone and we all let him down."

Daniel stopped. Tears had begun to roll down his cheeks. He wiped them away and continued.

"He didn't want to sell himself on the streets as so many of us have..... He wanted to be respected. He wanted to be loved.

"Now he has the love he so longed for in life."

Daniel left the podium and sat down.

A young girl got up with a guitar and sang a short song. Ben didn't know the song but caught the refrain : "On earth so alone, in Heaven so loved."

The celebrant spoke briefly in lieu of Christopher's parents, there was more music and then it was over.

Daniel came over to Julian and Ben.

"Thanks for coming. It would have been a bit lonely otherwise with just us." He smiled faintly.

"No worries." Julian assured him.

“It was the least we could do” added Ben.

They spoke to James and Chen before leaving for home.

Not wanting to be apart, they sat together arm in arm and looked at old photos. There had been many funerals since 1980 but they never really got used to it, especially when they were so young. They saw faces from long ago. Smiling faces. Hollow faces. Places they remembered. Places that were gone. A lot had changed in their lives and a lot would have to change before they would be accepted as equals.

It was shortly after this that Ben heard the first rumors of discontent among his Church’s authorities. Questions had been asked about the direction being taken at St. Aiden’s.

Julian gave Ben a C.D. for Christmas – *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* – Ben was delighted.

Bronwyn mentioned that there were a couple of important astrological aspects in 2009 so Ben spent the rest of the year worryong about the year to come.

PART 2.

January was hot. Too hot!

Julian and Ben chose one of the milder days to go to the beach. It was too much to sit in the sun on the really hot days.

Sunnyside nude beach on the Mornington Peninsula was frequented by both gay people and straight people. Ben had heard that the church at Mt. Eliza had complained about gay men having sex in the bushes behind the secluded beach. This only increased its allure for Julian. He was excited and talkative as they drove down the highway.

After parking in the allotted area at the base of the cliffs Ben and Julian made their way along the narrow beach between clusters of rocks.

The gay end was farthest from the car park. There were two or three groups of men sunbathing naked in the little cove.

Ben and Julian deposited their bags and laid out their beach towels. Gradually they shed their clothes until they were wearing only bathers. They thoroughly applied sunscreen, helping each other with the hard to get at spots, and then removed their bathers to finish the job.

Julian surveyed the scene. Two quite attractive men were walking arm in arm in the shallows, splashing water on each other from time to time. They were obviously a couple. There were several single men bathing alone and some groups of younger people.

Being a week day the beach was not crowded, which suited Ben, who didn't like crowds. They were free to enjoy the beach relatively undisturbed.

Ben had brought a book. It was a gay novel about the 1970s. He settled down to read.

"I'm going for a walk" announced Julian.

"O.K." replied Ben absently.

Julian was gone for quite some time. He walked to the end of the cove and began climbing the rocks. Ben knew that from there you could see the main beach. Men had been known to have sex in the hollows between the huge boulders unobserved.

Ben was not concerned. Julian was sensible enough not to have unprotected sex with a stranger. Ben was immersed in his book where men did have sex with strangers.

Suddenly he sensed that something was happening. There was excitement, chatter. He looked up and saw a stunning blond bodybuilder walking slowly towards them. At this stage he was wearing shorts and a t-shirt and carrying a sports bag.

All heads turned in his direction.

Undeterred he made his way to a vacant spot and began to disrobe. He was tanned all over. He applied copious amounts of sunscreen then walked languorously down to the water. His magnificently muscled body moved gracefully, like a gazelle. He radiated confidence. He knew that all eyes were on him.

After a while he returned to his place and lay down on his huge beach towel.

The excitement abated a little and the inhabitants of the beach returned to their activities.

Julian returned.

“Anything interesting?” Ben enquired casually.

“No there’s no one there.” There was a pause. “Do you want to go for a swim?” Julian enquired.

Ben put down his book and they walked quickly across the hot sand to the water’s edge. The sea was a beautiful aqua in the shallows, it turned a deeper blue farther out. The water contrasted with the ochre cliffs and metallic looking boulders in the blazing sun. The water was warm at first but got colder the further you went from the shore. They swam and dived for some time before returning to the beach to towel off.

The bodybuilder was not lying on his towel. Ben looked about nervously. The man was standing, as if posing, on an outcrop of rock at the far end of the beach. He seemed to be worshipping the sun.

“How about that!” Julian grinned.

“Indeed.” Parried Ben.

Eventually the sun began to sink in the sky and they packed up their belongings and set off for home. Ben was tired so he was happy for Julian to drive.

That night Julian requested *Muscle Mania* and the great green couch was once again their love bed.

It did not take long for Ben’s fears to be realized. Isabel had been asked to move on. She was to take two months leave to move to her new position so her departure would be

immediate. St. Aiden's must begin the long and complex procedure of calling a new minister.

In the meantime St. Aiden's was to have several interim ministers. Fortunately the retired ministers from Isabel's discussion group had been asked to fill in so there would be some continuity at least.

The discussion group itself had been disbanded.

"Sounds like a conspiracy to me." Julian was suspicious.

"Do you think so?"

"You must be making them nervous."

"About our progressive views you mean?" Ben played dumb.

"They're losing control, they want their power back."

"Sabotage?"

"Absolutely."

The three interim ministers were dubbed the three wise men because of their arrival the week of epiphany. The first to take a service was David Atkins. His sermon on the baptism of Jesus was erudite and clear – water was a recurring symbol in the Bible, from the flood to Moses in the bulrushes, from the parting of the Red Sea to crossing the Jordan River. He quoted Psalms 29 : "The voice of the Lord is heard on the seas; the glorious God thunders, and his voice echoes over the ocean..... The Lord rules over the deep waters...."(GNB) This was to demonstrate that water was associated with the power of God in the Old Testament. He went on to show how this was developed in the New Testament beginning with the Baptism of Jesus which was at the beginning of the gospel of Mark.

This was not new but he showed a willingness to approach the Bible as symbolic rather than literal.

David Atkins, Colin Pierce, and John Dowd rotated their responsibilities and each of them preached in a way which was satisfactory at least. They stuck to the lectionary so the readings were set each week but the research and thought which went into the sermons was helpful and satisfying.

On the Sunday afternoon of the following week Ben attended a special meeting of the congregation where they voted on various issues in order to create a mission statement to be presented to the prospective ministers.

Ben did not think he should be directly involved in the selection process but he had made it quite clear to the panel of representatives that he would appreciate someone with liberal views who was open to homosexuals in the Church.

The mission statement was prepared by a special facilitator who had experience with other congregations. The requirements were broad and, Ben thought, vague. Homosexuality was not mentioned directly but could be included in *Acceptance of Marginalized People*. Likewise liberal theology could be under *Broad Theological Basis*.

Ben had already spoken to the delegates - they had assured him that his wishes would be accommodated – so he didn't make a fuss.

A few days later Ben heard from Beth that Isabel had got together with several associates and formed *The Progressive Net* which would continue to hold regular meetings in a community hall in Hawthorn. Ben checked dates on the new website.

Ben had planned a garden party for the first Saturday in March to coincide with the flowering of the crepe-myrtle tree. He had spent days poring over the guest list and invitations.

When the day finally arrived he was on edge all morning and hardly touched his lunch. Rowan had organized a string quartet and they came sooner than expected. Rowan's wife Sonia was with her husband.

The other guests began to arrive shortly afterwards. The first were Isabel and her husband George. Philip Newberry was close behind, relieved not to be first. He had brought his guitar at Ben's request. He was to play while the quartet were on a break.

James and Chen appeared and Julian introduced them. Beth was alone. She was dressed in a white pantsuit with a silk rainbow scarf that Ben admired immensely.

Tyrone Wells arrived with a giant African man whose skin was so dark it was almost blue.

Daniel Jacobsen brought a young friend. The boy was well built for a teenager. They looked delighted to have been invited. Ben smiled. They would be disappointed if they knew how mundane Ben's life was.

The famous fashion designer Steven Reynolds came fashionably late. He was accompanied by a gorgeous young man that Ben didn't know. His blond hair and blue eyes shone in the dazzling sunlight.

The string quartet were playing quietly.

Adrian Burton and his wife Margaret were the last. Adrian had been held up by business at their church. He apologized and sat down in one of the wrought iron garden chairs. Margaret was nervous and asked for a drink.

"Alcoholic or fruit?"

"Alcoholic please."

Ben supplied two alcoholic punches and Margaret sat down next to her husband and passed him the drink. Adrian looked unwontedly anxious and Ben enquired after him.

"There's nothing wrong I hope."

"Oh just Church politics," was Adrian's wry response.

"I see." Ben didn't press further. "You know Isabel and George of course."

"Yes we've met several times."

"Rowan and Beth were at St. Aiden's when you were there. You'll know them. Philip is new. I'll introduce you to the others later."

"Thank you." Adrian sighed. Margaret smiled sympathetically.

Tyrone and his African friend were standing in the shade of the crepe-myrtle. The magnificent cerise pink blooms hovered over their heads like the clouds of heaven. They were on their own so Ben got himself a fruit punch and joined them.

"Wonderful that you could come."

"Our pleasure entirely" beamed Tyrone.

"And this is.....?"

"Amos Abacha." He offered his hand.

"Pleased to meet you Amos. And where do you come from?"

Amos spoke with an accent but his English was excellent. "Nigeria, Lagos, that's the main port."

"Amos was a weight lifter in the Olympic team." Tyrone explained. "He had to leave Nigeria because of the treatment of homosexuals there."

"Yes," continued Amos, "The law and the churches are very anti-gay there and the Muslim *shariah* law is very severe....." He looked unhappy as he remembered.

"I hope you can find a new home here in Australia" offered Ben.

"Yes, my asylum claim is being processed now. I hope I can stay."

“And where did you meet Tyrone?”

“At a dance party on new year’s eve.” Amos beamed. Tyrone threw his chest out.

“I hope you have a pleasant afternoon.” Ben looked around. “I’ll introduce you.”

Ben led them over to where James and Chen were standing and left them talking together.

He joined Steven and his partner who were talking to Isabel and George.

“And how’s my holiday house coming along?” Steven asked cheekily.

“Very well actually.”

“Am I in for a surprise?”

“A pleasant surprise I hope.” Ben reassured him. “And this is.....?”

“Oh David’s one of my models.” Steven answered for him. “He’s with me for the day.”

“Good. You know Tyrone Wells.”

The three of them had been at school together although Tyrone was several years younger.

“Yes I do but who’s that great black man with him?”

“His name is Amos Abacha and he’s a Nigerian Olympic weightlifter.”

Steven rolled his eyes. “Lucky Tyrone.”

“He’s awaiting his asylum application.”

“I see.”

“Is he O.K. for accommodation?” asked Isabel.

“I’m not sure. I didn’t ask.”

“Because if he’s not the Church may be able to arrange accommodation.”

“Do you want to speak with him?”

Isabel followed Ben across the lawn.

“Isabel used to be our minister at St. Aiden’s. She was enquiring about your accommodation Amos.”

“I’m alright thank you. I’m staying with Tyrone.”

“Oh.....good.” Isabel stammered. “Amos is a Christian name isn’t it?”

“Yes it is.”

“Were you a churchgoer in Nigeria?”

“Yes I was – most African Christians go to church.”

“Well St. Stephen’s is an open church. You may find it suits your needs. Have you been to church here in Australia?”

“Not yet. Tyrone doesn’t go to church.”

"You're welcome at St. Stephen's anytime. We worship on Sundays at 10:00 am. I'll give you the address." She produced a small card with the address and telephone number of her new church and handed it to Amos.

"Thank you very much."

Tyrone was looking sheepish. "It's a very long time since I went to church." He pleaded.

Ben left them to their debate.

The string quartet was playing Beethoven. The cool, mathematical harmonies progressed smoothly in the quiet garden.

Apart from the crepe-myrtle there were not many flowers at this time of year. Red and purple dahlias with their star-like ray flowers were the exception. The sacred bamboos and the Japanese maple were just beginning to turn.

Beth and Philip were standing apart from the others under the pergola. Ben went up to talk to them. Philip knew a few of the other guests but they were mostly couples and people tended to stick with their partners. Beth was the only other single there so they had gravitated together.

"Beth. You know Adrian and Margaret don't you?"

"Yes of course." She was polite.

"Would you like to introduce Philip to them? They're over there near the table." Then to Philip. "You'll like Adrian. He's very strong on prayer."

Philip smiled as Beth took him across the lawn to where Adrian and Margaret were sitting.

Julian was distributing finger food from an enormous tray. When he had finished he joined Daniel and his young friend. When Ben came over Julian introduced him to Stewart Wetherby. The young man smiled and nodded slightly. Julian had got him a beer.

"And what do you do Stewart?"

"I'm still at school!" He looked startled.

"Of course. My mistake." Ben apologized. "What year?"

"Year eleven."

"And how's that going?"

"Fine."

Daniel put his arm around Stewart and kissed him on the cheek. "He's my hero aren't you Stewart."

Stewart grinned and took a swig of beer.

"And how do you find it in school these days? Being gay I mean."

"It's pretty rough. Gay's a dirty word in school. You get called a fagot and stuff. But I can look after myself."

"I'm sure you can!" Ben turned to Daniel. "That must be a great comfort to you."

Daniel agreed.

The string quartet were taking a break and Philip got up to play his guitar. Ben was nervous about what he might play – he had left it entirely up to him – but the Bach guitar piece that followed was most appropriate. When he finished there was applause all round.

Ben took Steven inside to show him the plans for his holiday house which were nearing completion. Steven was thrilled with the unique construction that Ben had designed. He particularly liked the flowing lines following the shape of the swimming pool.

When they returned to the garden Ben led Stephen down the slope to where he had planted a fern grotto in which he had placed several stone statues of fairies. As they turned past the stone wall which divided the grotto from the main garden they caught sight of two muscular, naked bodies - one black, one white – locked in an erotic embrace.

"D.....?" Steven bit his tongue.

They quickly turned around and scampered back up the slope.

"I really do have fairies at the bottom of my garden!" They both laughed in a way that they hadn't done for years.

They rejoined the others as the string quartet played a melancholy Andante.

At about 4:00 pm the sky suddenly clouded over and they all ran for cover, including the musicians. The guests then began to leave and by 5:00 pm Ben and Julian were left together again. Julian had enjoyed the day. He was happy and cooperative.

After they had cleared away the party items they went upstairs for a light dinner before retiring early.

The first meeting of *The Progressive Net* was held in a beautiful community centre in Hawthorn. The brand new centre was built next to the secondary school and the light and open hall was hired out on weekends.

The subject of the lecture was the usurping of Jesus message by the state under Constantine. It was entitled *The Second Betrayal*. The speaker was Peter Campbell who was a chaplain at one of the colleges of Melbourne University.

Campbell demonstrated how Jesus message of unconditional love and forgiveness had been subordinated to the Machiavellian mass control techniques of the conservative establishment at Nicea (or before).

Later Augustine had extended this control to sex (governing everyone). He had made sex the reason for the Fall of Humanity and had used guilt and disgust to make men and women feel unworthy of God's love, and had then provided forgiveness for the price of absolute obedience.

Lastly Jesus had been said to be returning to judge humanity (something he had refused to do in life) and the theology of rewards and punishments as a deterrent to sin (which Jesus had rejected) had been returned to the place of power which the Pharisees and Sadducees had established.

Thus Jesus message of love and forgiveness had been lost to the world. In its place we have the Church.

He asked for questions.

A middle aged woman in a floral blouse asked why this was not the orthodox understanding of the Bible.

Peter answered that our perceptions had been altered by the establishment in order to confuse earthly authority with heavenly authority. He said that we had been sold the idea that Christianity was political conservatism whereas in the Bible the conservative authorities had been the Pharisees and Sadducees and the state had been Rome. Jesus had been unorthodox, even radical.

An elderly man with a soft, intelligent face asked what he thought of the first betrayal by Judas.

Peter responded by saying that Judas was another rendition of Judah which had always been associated with conservatism. Joseph, on the other hand, had represented a free spirit. It was interesting, he said, that Jesus father had been called Joseph whereas the genealogies, which had been added later, made him a descendant of the house of Judah.

This was good news to Ben. At last he could see what had happened and what had been lost. The roles had been reversed and Jesus name and the prophesies from the Old Testament had been used by his enemies to usurp the power of God!

Julian was right. This was a threat to the conservatives' monopoly on power and authority. The Progressive Net, however, was a private organization meeting in a private establishment. This had been a master stroke by Isabel and her friends. The Church had no power here.

The progressive movement was growing but was it growing fast enough? Could *The Progressive Net* answer the thirst for spirituality in society? Was this the answer?

Ben went to visit Robert. The smiling face that greeted him was barely recognizable, so used was he to frowns and scowls.

"So how have you been?" The usual question.

"Good. Much better. The demonic voices have almost gone."

"That's great. And the music....?"

"I've thrown all my rock C.D.s out."

"All of them."

"Yes. I don't need them anymore. Philip Newberry was right, it's the music which causes the demonic voices. If you look closely enough at them and listen to the words you can see it."

"And how does the classical music affect you?"

"It's more calming. Some of the sacred music creates a sort of a spiritual feeling. The voices there are helpful....." He trailed off.

"I've been meaning to ask you about visual stimuli." Ben recalled.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if music affects you so much how do videos and D.V.D.s affect you?"

"I'm much more careful what I watch. I don't watch any horror or vampires, or violence."

"And the sport?"

"I hadn't thought of that. I don't like the commentary. It's so aggressive and if I hear one more person say they have to work harder I think I'll scream."

"I know what you mean."

"Come to think of it some of the voices are obsessed with sport" Robert observed.

"Is that a problem?"

"It's annoying. They sort of sell it on the phone."

"The phone?"

“Yes, the phone’s what they call telepathy.”

“The voices you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Philip suggested that there was involvement in the media and sport.”

“The mass media?”

“Yes. You can see the appeal. A web of evil he called it.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good. And your medication is stable?”

“Yes. I’m on the smallest dose now.”

Ben left his brother to his new life. He was so much better that Ben could hardly believe it, and it was lasting.

Ben had a phone call from Tyrone Wells. Amos’s application for asylum had been rejected.

“Apparently persecution of homosexuals is not grounds for political asylum.” Tyrone was blunt. “Amos says he’s not going back.”

“What will you do?”

“We’ll appeal of course but it doesn’t look good.”

“Doesn’t Steven Reynolds know someone in the cabinet?”

“Yes I think so.”

“Could he get someone to intervene.” Ben was hopeful.

“Maybe. I’ll ask him. He could get him to kick up a stink anyway.”

“Go and see him. It’s always better to do these things face to face. And take Amos with you. That should help.”

“Thanks I’ll do that.”

Tyrone rang off and Ben was left feeling angry and afraid. When he told Julian what had happened he hit the roof.

“Anything else! Anything but homosexuality! What do they think they’re doing in Canberra? We may as well have a conservative government for all the good they’re doing! What’s going on!”

“They think they’re in the middle.”

“The middle! More like the far right if you ask me!”

“They seem to think that *gay rights* shifts them too far to the left which makes them unelectable.”

“So we’re the sacrificial lambs are we?!”

“It would seem so.”

Julian was lost for words. He was turning red with frustration.

“I don’t like it any more than you do.” Ben consoled him.

Julian kicked the rubbish bin and stormed out of the room.

At Easter there was no Thursday night service so Colin Pierce took Good Friday. His sermon was bold and concise – Jesus had been crucified because he had become a threat to the religious and political authorities of the time. There had been no divine violence and no blood sacrifice.

Colin was free to say what he believed because he was retired and was no longer bound by Church authority.

Ben was happy. It was as he had always thought and Colin’s sermon went a long way to erasing the image of God as an abusive parent.

On Easter Sunday John Dowd spoke about the resurrection. This, he said, had been a spiritual resurrection as Paul had thought. The empty tomb was symbolic rather than literal. The versions of Sunday morning differed becoming more embellished with time. The version in Mark appears to have originally ended with the women fleeing in terror from the tomb. By John Mary Magdalene speaks briefly to the risen Christ.

The following week David Atkins spoke on the road to Emmaus and the other sightings of Jesus before the ascension. He emphasized that these had been spiritual rather than physical appearances, that it had been Jesus spirit that they had seen not his body.

He also encouraged the congregation to view the ascension as a symbol of Jesus moving into a spiritual realm. To go “up” was no longer a sustainable symbol because to go “up” was now to go into outer space so the symbolism needed adjusting. There was tittering in the pews.

After the service Ben took him aside and put forward his theory that the sightings of Jesus were like modern experiences. Many people had reported seeing loved ones shortly after

they had died and before they had moved on. Ben thought that the biblical records sounded similar. David seemed to appreciate Ben's interest. At least he was listening.

Over the next few weeks the wise men addressed successive passages of Acts. Their intelligent interpretations were appreciated.

Ben questioned many of the traditional interpretations of the events leading up to Pentecost. Paul's conversion, for example, was not backed up by his own writings. The story of blindness and recovered sight was a symbol of his spiritual blindness which had been dispelled by the special person mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12 who had opened his eyes to the truth about Jesus.

It was now Mother's Day. Ben picked up Robert before driving to Kath's where they were to meet Bronwyn. Ben had prepared food which he was bringing with him. Bronwyn would provide the rest.

Kath was radiant. She kissed Robert and Ben.

"How are you then?" Ben enquired.

"I'm in excellent health." She boasted. "And how's Julian?"

"Fine. He's taking his parents out to lunch."

"And Robbie. How are you?"

"Very good thank you." Ben had coached Robert not to say too much about Philip Newberry's letter because Kath might overreact.

Bronwyn arrived with the rest of the lunch and they all sat down to the light meal and a rosé that Ben had brought.

"You look well Robert." Bronwyn commented.

Robert hesitated then said, "I've been listening to some classical music - baroque mostly. It seems to help."

"I've heard," Bronwyn responded, "that baroque music in particular puts the mind into an alpha state so you're listening to the right things." Bronwyn herself had wide ranging tastes in music.

"Yes." Kath put in. "I knew someone, one of my students, who was studying the effects of music on mental illness. Elizabeth Hordern her name was. I think she wrote a book about it. I'll see if I can get it for you."

“That would be good thanks.” Robert smiled.

“Chittananda of course,” Kath continued, “always said that modern music was bad for your health. It changed the heartbeat in some way.”

There was a silence.

“So are you still on bushfire alert?” Ben asked Bronwyn in order to change the subject.

“Not now. The danger’s passed for the time being. I can’t say I miss it.”

“No. It must be terrible being on edge all the time.” Kath was sympathetic.

“It’s not the best.”

“So what have you been doing with yourself up there.” Kath enquired.

“I have my tarot readings and some astrology. The garden keeps me busy.”

“You aren’t lonely there by yourself?” Kath continued.

“Isis keeps me company.”

“Good.”

The phone rang. It was Carolyn from Sydney. Everyone spoke to her in turn. When Ben’s turn came he asked about her children.

“Phoebe’s on an archaeological dig in Egypt. She’s an expert on hieroglyphic inscriptions. Zach’s acting at a theatre in the city. He’s playing Romeo at the moment.”

“Are they hitched yet?”

“Phoebe’s too busy, and she doesn’t fancy any of her workmates. I don’t really know about Zach. There may be someone in the wings.”

Ben had always wondered if Zach was gay. He didn’t seem to have any girlfriends. Perhaps he was just secretive.

“You’re not seeing anyone yourself are you?” Ben teased.

“No. I’m off men altogether.” Carolyn was certain. “There will be no relationships for me with men or women.”

“Well on that note I’ll hand you over to Robert.”

Ben handed the phone to Robert and resumed his seat. After each of them had spoken to Carolyn the phone was returned to Kath who signed off for everyone.

“It was good of Carolyn to ring wasn’t it.” Kath was pleased.

They finished eating their dinner and cleared away the plates before moving to the lounge room where Kath asked Ben about Church. Ben gave a brief summary of the situation at St. Aiden’s.

“So it could be a while before we have a permanent minister.” He concluded.

“There mustn’t be all that many young ministers available.” Bronwyn observed.

"I suppose not."

There was a silence.

Kath asked Robert what he had been doing.

"Not much." He laughed. "I don't get many visitors. Apart from Ben that is. I go to the drop-in centre sometimes but that's about it."

"You seem quite well though." Kath was observant.

"Yes I'm much better."

"Good." Kath was relieved. She had worried about Robert leaving home. She wondered how he would manage on his own. He had been with them so long. It seemed to be working out alright now.

They offered to do the dishes before they left but Kath insisted she could cope and they left her happily tidying up.

Ben said goodbye to Bronwyn and drove Robert home before returning home himself.

It had been a long day. Julian met Ben as he came in.

"How did it go?" He asked.

"Good. Everyone's well. How were Barbara and Ted."

"They're O.K.." Julian was vague.

Julian was an only child. His parents always spoiled him. His relationship with them was enigmatic. Julian was much more interested in young people - his friends and his juniors. He had never told his parents he was gay. Ben hadn't asked why. There was something there that Julian didn't want to talk about. Ted had once said that there was no such thing as homosexuality. Ben had been shocked but Julian was silent. His mother had looked the other way.

"They're always O.K.." Julian remarked.

The next meeting of *The Progressive Net* was held on the following Sunday. The subject was *Sex Life – Sex and the Sacred*. The speaker was a modern theologian from Sydney called Rodney Stark.

To the surprise of everyone he began to talk about astrology and how the sign of Scorpio had influenced people's thinking about sex. Scorpio was the eighth sign of the Zodiac and

was associated with sex and death. He put forward the thesis that this influence was now so widespread that it formulated people's ideas about sex, linking them to death.

"Death, as you know, is a theological concept referring to separation from God. Paul says 'For sin pays its wage - death'(GNB); there are the seven deadly sins; Jesus is accused of death by Caiaphas. So associations with death are heavy with religious overtones."

He went on to say that these ideas had become confused and that sex was now unconsciously thought to be the cause of *death to God* as Augustine had suggested.

People were shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

Ben thought of Philip Newberry's comments about death.

Rodney Stark then changed course and suggested that these ideas were false and that sex, as the creator of life itself, should be associated with God and life. He spoke about nature which, he said, was full of seed and sexual activity and as such was a vital component of God's self. Ideas of celibacy and chastity, so popular in Christianity, were anti-nature and anti-God.

Finally he said that respect for the object of desire flowed from love for that person and that our actions would then not violate their rights or wishes.

There were not many questions so the meeting wound up quickly. Ben found Isabel and asked her if he could get a transcript of the lecture to give to Philip Newberry. She said it would be on the website in a few days.

"How did you find Rodney Stark?"

Ben had e-mailed Philip a copy of the transcript and made a date to meet for coffee. They sat together now in the little café.

"I found him very good actually." Philip paused. "Death is the big thing in rock music. It's the source of their power and their purpose. Some of it's called death metal, they're obviously Satanic, but the others conceal it." He named a 1970s rock star. "He sells death, evil and violence.

"They think they're killing their fans, in a spiritual sense if not literally, sex drugs and rock and roll equals death to God. It's a subtle game of temptation and damnation. They want to get you into Hell. That's their plan. The end of religion is part of it too, they turn people away from God.

“Scorpio’s their favorite sign. They’re obsessed with sex and death and power. They work on the unconscious, and its hidden, secret. Darkness, violence and evil are the worst aspects of Scorpio.

“But the idea that sex is life is logical if you think about it - sex creates life not death - so what he says is true.”

Ben smiled. He was pleased with the way this piece of the puzzle fitted with Philip. It was becoming clearer. The web of evil was turning everyone away from the Church and poisoning their minds - hence the violence in clubs and bars. Modern rock bands had no ideals, it was all about fast cars and money. It wasn’t like the 60s and 70s. According to Philip, however, the rock bands of the 60s and 70s had pioneered Satanism and black magic in popular music. It was hidden, subtle sabotage, like cursing a plant.

He must ask Robert what the difference was like – how he felt now compared with before he swore off rock music. He asked Philip. “How does it feel, when it’s gone I mean?”

“It’s different. Like lifting a weight off your shoulders. You feel lighter, more positive. God brings spontaneous joy. You feel happy for no reason.”

“I meant to tell you about my brother Robert. He has schizophrenia and he was hearing demonic voices very similar to yours.” Ben paused. “I showed him your letter and we decided to stop the rock music and try some classical instead - mostly sacred music like Bach or Gregorian chants. Anyway the demonic voices have almost stopped and he’s so much better. It’s like a miracle.

“That’s great!” Philip grinned. “That’s what the letter is for, to spread the news!”

“It certainly helped in Robert’s case. It may have something to do with mental illness.”

“Madness, insanity is a negative interpretation of Aquarius and it’s ruler Uranus. That’s what they do. Feed the negatives. You’ll find that Robert has Aquarius or a strong Uranus in his horoscope.”

“That’s interesting. My sister Bronwyn does some astrology. I’ll ask her about Robert’s chart.”

“Do that. It might confirm what I’m saying.”

“I will.”

On Wednesday of the following week Ben received a phone call from Bronwyn.

"Remember I told you there were some important astrological aspects this year?" Bronwyn was upbeat.

"Yes." Ben was wary.

"Well this is it!" She proclaimed. "Today, or precisely tomorrow morning at 6:07 am, there will be a conjunction of Jupiter and Neptune in Aquarius."

"And what does that mean?"

"It's to do with Aquarian religion and spirituality. The conjunction occurs where the head of the western fish of Pisces overlaps the heel of the water carrier in Aquarius, which is the first star in the constellation of Aquarius."

"The *Age of Aquarius*?"

"Something to do with it. Strictly speaking the *Age of Aquarius* won't begin until the vernal equinox progresses into the sign of Aquarius in 2377AD. This conjunction is a sort of a pointer, a window if you like."

"And what do you see?"

"Well the constellation of Pisces, the age we are in now, has two fish – the east fish which overlaps the sign of Aries and the west fish which overlaps the sign of Aquarius. So if you accept that Jesus is the guiding spirit of Pisces then the western fish would represent the Protestant Christian Churches.

"It's the head of this fish which overlaps the heel of the water carrier at 26° 24' Aquarius which is within 4 minutes of tonight's conjunction, which is close."

"So what's this got to do with Aquarian religion?"

"Don't be dumb Ben." She chided. "The head of the western fish of Pisces represents the ideas or beliefs of the Protestant Christian Churches."

"Progressive Christianity?"

"Not just that but all the new spiritual ideas which are appearing in the world at the moment but particularly in the Protestant west."

"That's very interesting." Ben agreed.

"It's exciting Ben! And what's more it happens three times : tomorrow morning, July 10th, and December 21st so it will last!"

"I'll just write down those dates : May 28th, July 10th, and December 21st. Thanks."

"And there's another important conjunction in Pisces in 2010."

"In Pisces so Jesus, right?"

"It means all kinds of spirituality but Jesus is typical of Pisces yes."

"So 2010 as well!"

“Yes. So keep your eyes open.”

“It’s interesting that you’re talking about astrology because I wanted to ask you about Robert. Does he have Aquarius in his chart or Uranus aspects?”

“He certainly does. Robert has Saturn in Pisces opposite Uranus and Pluto in Virgo which creates unconscious conflict. He also has the moon in Aquarius. Why?”

“Just something Philip Newberry said to me.”

“Is it a secret?”

“No, but now isn’t the time. I’ll explain later.”

“A mystery. I love that.”

She rang off and Ben was left feeling elated, Bronwyn’s excitement was contagious.

He wondered about Aquarius. The water carrier quenching people’s spiritual thirst with the waters of life.

Suddenly he remembered a water carrier in the Gospels. He got his Bible and looked for the passage. It was in Luke 22 when Jesus is preparing for the Passover – the Last Supper – he says to the disciples, “As you go into the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house : ‘The Teacher says to you, Where is the room where my disciples and I will eat the Passover meal?’ He will show you a large furnished room upstairs, where you will get everything ready.”(GNB)

That was interesting. It was in this upstairs room that the covenant between the disciples, the representatives of humanity, and God took place through Jesus, and you got there by following the water carrier.

What could that mean?

He had always thought that this passage was strangely specific. Was it possible that it referred to astrology like the three wise men following the star?

In any case it validated his interest in Progressive Christianity - new ideas in the western Protestant Churches. According to Bronwyn they would merge with Aquarian ideas which were what? Freedom, equality, and humanitarianism. He knew that much.

He looked at his watch. It was nearly 6:00 pm. He went to the kitchen to prepare dinner.

That night Ben had a dream.

He was carrying a bucket of water in the garden and watering the plants. He came to the rose garden. The thorny branches were unadorned. He poured water from the bucket and

as he watched a tiny bud began to form. It grew larger. Then it began to open and a beautiful pink rose bloomed before his eyes.

He woke up and looked at the clock : 6:07 am.

Sunday was Pentecost. Many of the older ladies wore red to represent the fire of the Holy Spirit. The reading was the story of the tongues of fire descending on the gathered disciples 50 days after the death of Jesus. This was the famous speaking in tongues which so impressed the Pentecostalists. It was symbolic of the mission of the disciples to spread the teachings of Jesus throughout the world.

David Atkins' sermon touched on the significance of fire in the Bible. God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush which was not consumed. There were several stories of passing through fire unharmed.

David cited the New Testament story in Luke 9 when the village of the Samaritans did not receive Jesus and the disciples James and John said, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"

Jesus turned and rebuked them."(GNB)

This was significant, David said, because it counteracted all the stories where God uses fire to destroy people. So we see at Pentecost the tongues of fire empowering the disciples to speak. There is no harm in the fire from God.

Ben was impressed. So many of the stories about God were angry and vengeful but Jesus rebuked the disciples for trying to harm the Samaritans who, Ben knew, were tribal enemies of the Israelites. They were called dogs in another passage.

After the service Ben spoke to Jean who was one of the red ladies.

"What did you think of David's sermon?" He enquired thoughtfully.

"It was different. They usually do the *Tower of Babel*."

"Yes. The stories he chose about fire were interesting. I've always suspected the stories where God destroys people. They seem somehow contradictory."

Jean hesitated. "It's not an orthodox interpretation I'm afraid. It wipes out half the Bible!" She sounded alarmed.

Ben thought for a moment. "It depends on how you interpret the Bible I suppose."

“It does.” This was intended to end discussion of the subject. “How is your mother, is she well?”

“We all went over for Mother’s Day. Kath’s very well actually, she enjoyed the day immensely.”

“That’s good to hear. So many younger people ignore their elderly relatives. Church people are so much better.” Jean was elderly herself.

“Yes.....” Ben acknowledged vaguely. “How is the calling of the new minister coming along.” Jean was one of the delegates.

“Slowly. We haven’t interviewed anybody yet. The presbytery is investigating several candidates but no one has been put forward as yet.”

“I see. I suppose there aren’t all that many younger people available.”

“I wouldn’t know. There must be some.”

“Anyway you know my position on the matter.”

“Yes.” She did not speak of homosexuality herself.

“Well it’s nice to catch up. I’ll see you next week.”

David was in deep discussion with Beth so Ben left them to it.

When he arrived home Julian asked him how it went. “You didn’t speak in tongues did you?”

“Don’t be facetious.” Ben snapped.

“Sorry.”

Ben missed the discussion group. The Sunday services were good but Ben liked to get his teeth stuck into the more esoteric aspects of Progressive Christianity. The Net meetings were only held every couple of months and there was little discussion.

He felt confident that the panel of delegates would choose a suitable minister but he couldn’t help worrying. Were they being quashed? He would have to wait and see.

Work had begun on Steven Reynolds’s holiday house and Ben spent a day on the Peninsula overseeing the construction. The sweaty muscles of the workmen were always a temptation but Ben reminded himself that Julian’s body was more exciting than anyone’s on site. He left the foreman with strict instructions about how to proceed.

When he arrived home Julian was still out so he went into the library and pulled out the horoscope that Bronwyn had given him for his birthday.

He noted that his Jupiter and north node of the moon in Libra formed a trine aspect to the Jupiter/Neptune conjunction in Aquarius. He knew from Bronwyn's notes that this was good. Ease and harmony it said.

His moon at 0° Pisces was on the cusp of Pisces and Aquarius and his Part of Fortune and the asteroid Chiron were at 20° Aquarius.

He also had Venus conjunct Uranus in the twelfth house, which was the house equivalent of Pisces – spirituality – she said.

It would seem that the big conjunction in Aquarius was to do with love in Ben's life. Julian was a Libra but only his ascendant or outward appearance aspected the conjunction.

Ben thought about the sign of Aquarius. The symbol was the hieroglyph for water and the pictogram was a water carrier kneeling down with a huge jar on his shoulder pouring water over the sign of Capricorn, the goat/fish.

The Egyptian hieroglyph of the jar meant the heart. Ben knew from his reading that the culmination of Egyptian religion was something called the intelligence or wisdom of the heart. This seemed to be perfectly represented by the symbols of Aquarius, which was an air sign.

The hieroglyph, however, meant water - the enigmatic waters of life. If these waters flowed from the heart then they must represent love. Was it love that made the rose bloom.

You can know something intellectually, however, and still not understand it. Ben knew this. He also knew what it was like to live without love. When he had been young he had lived for long periods without love in his life. It had been cold. It had been rough. He also recalled when love was present. At these times he had coped much better.

You had to give love. To be loved was good but to love someone else was even better. Love was the only thing that actually increased the more you gave it away, like the *cornucopia* or the cruze of oil that never ran dry in the Bible.

So he made a decision to love people when he was with them : Julian, Robert, Kath..... He was too cerebral. He related to people through the mind. In future he would live through his heart.

He had an opportunity to put this into practice immediately when Julian entered the room.

"What are you doing?" He demanded.

"Reading my horoscope. Why?"

"I don't know why you keep reading that stuff, it's all crap."

Ben bit his tongue. He knew that Julian was feeling neglected and that that was why he was lashing out. Ben decided that this was his fault. He was not showing Julian enough love.

“What would you like to do?” He asked warmly.

“I don’t know.” Julian’s tone changed immediately. He came over and put his arm around Ben’s shoulders. “We could make love.”

“We could.” Ben knew that Julian’s sex drive was more urgent than his own.

They went upstairs.

“Your place or mine?” Ben quipped.

“My place for a change.”

They usually made love in Ben’s big bed but he accepted the invitation and they turned down the passageway.

Julian’s room was not as big as Ben’s. There was a double bed with a black leather bed head. A picture of New York – a black and white photograph – hung over the bed. A chest of drawers and a black leather armchair furnished the room. There was a small walnut desk with a computer in the corner.

Julian turned back the navy blue coverlet and they began to disrobe. As usual Julian threw his clothes on the floor and Ben folded his neatly and placed them on the armchair.

They lay down on the clean, blue linen.

There were two ways to do this : the purely physical/frictional way or the way of love – to make love to the other person.

Ben chose the latter and brought Julian to a magnificent climax in the vortex of his love. It was interesting that Julian, who was an adept at sexual technique, responded to love so spectacularly.

Afterwards they lay in each other’s arms. Julian became quiet and actually went to sleep. Ben felt good - warm and relaxed. He let Julian sleep in his arms until it was time to get up for dinner.

It was at this time that someone from Ben’s past suddenly reappeared. Ben was sitting in the café of the local bookshop when a familiar voice called his name.

Ben looked up. “Barry, Barry Sutton?”

Barry Sutton was Ben’s gay friend who had attended Chittananda’s yoga school in the 1970s. The last Ben had heard of him was that he had gone to India shortly afterwards.

“One and the same.”

Barry was blond and tanned. He wore shorts and a loud, orange shirt. From behind him a small, plump man with a soft expression emerged and smiled down at Ben.

“This is Claude Dujon, my partner.”

“Pleased to meet you Claude. Sit down.” Ben motioned to the chairs opposite.

“Thank you.”

“So what have you been doing since 1979 - day one.” Ben quipped.

“You know I went to India.”

Ben nodded.

“Well I had an incredible experience there. I suppose you’d call it a spiritual experience.”

Barry looked at Claude. “And I met Claude who was on holiday from France. We’ve been together ever since.” Barry beamed and Claude smiled demurely.

“When we came back to Australia,” Barry continued, “I studied to become a yoga teacher. At a different school of course. I didn’t tell them I was gay. I’ve been teaching yoga ever since.”

“Sounds romantic. Do you have your own practice?”

“Yes. In Sandringham. What about you?”

“Me? I became an architect. I’m with someone – Julian Black – we’ve been together for three years now.”

“Did you study yoga? I know your mother was a student.”

“No. I never found yoga enticing. I go to a church.”

“Yoga isn’t strictly speaking a religion of course. It’s a technology which can be practiced with any religion.” Barry was knowledgeable.

“Do you think that the world’s religions can ever live in harmony? There so much conflict. Julian says all religions are good for is crusades, inquisitions, and jihads.”

“It’s not good at the moment. And the Pope doesn’t help.” Barry glanced sideways at Claude.

“No. We all seem to get hooked on the outward symbols and never get to the heart of religion.” Ben complained.

“I agree entirely.”

“Do you share our affliction Claude?”

“I was brought up Catholic.” Claude responded. “I’m not religious now. Barry taught me some yoga but that’s about it.”

"I'm a member of the Progressive Net. That's a new group which has been formed here in Melbourne to study modern, radical theologians. All Christian so far."

"Sounds interesting." Barry replied.

"Would you like to come over for dinner sometime?"

Ben gave Barry his address and telephone number and they made an appointment for Saturday week.

They said goodbye and Ben was left feeling strangely happy.

"You'll never guess who I met the other day." Ben was enigmatic.

Kath looked startled. "Who?"

"Barry Sutton."

"Barry Sutton?"

"You remember. At Chittananda's yoga school in the 1970s."

"Young Barry. Yes he was a friend of yours." She recalled. "He left for some reason. A disagreement with Chittananda."

"He didn't give up yoga though. He went to India then trained as a yoga teacher."

"You don't know which school he studied at?"

"I didn't ask."

"So is he teaching?"

"Yes. He has his own practice. I've invited him over to dinner next Saturday night."

"That should be nice dear."

Ben didn't want to open up the subject of Chittananda's homophobia. Kath wouldn't take it well and her peace of mind mattered to Ben.

"I have some questions I want to ask him." Ben teased.

"About yoga?"

"East and west. Philosophy."

"You can ask me Ben. It's not as if I don't know."

"I was looking for a different perspective. Call it a second opinion."

"I see. I'm not good enough for you." She was joking.

"No."

"You will find that at a deeper level all religions are the same."

"Yes," Ben hesitated, "we assume that but I want to find out what Barry really thinks."

“Good. It may be enlightening.”

There was a silence.

“How’s Isabel?” Kath enquired.

“I told you she’s left St. Aiden’s but I still see her at *The Progressive Net*.”

“Sounds like tennis on wheels.”

“I think the name is a play on words.”

“Where is Isabel preaching now?”

“St. Steven’s. It’s a big church in the outer eastern suburbs.”

“And is she happy there?”

“I don’t know. She seems happy enough.”

“And this progressive thingy. How that going.”

“Net. Good. It was all about sex last month. Sex/Life.”

“What were they saying about sex?” She was curious and anxious at once.

“He said that God’s creation was full of seed and sexual activity and as the creator of life itself sex was intimately entwined with God.”

“Strangely sensible for a Church.”

“It’s not really a Church. It’s pretty radical but people are responding well.”

“Well keep up the good work. Maybe there’s hope for the Church yet.”

Afternoon tea was served.

“We had Pentecost a couple of weeks ago.”

“How did that go.” Kath was nervous.

“David talked about fire – the burning bush and the disciples wanting to call down fire from heaven.”

“What happens I’ve forgotten.”

“Jesus rebukes them.”

“I don’t remember that being preached in the Church.”

“No I’ve never heard anybody preach on that passage before.”

“They’re all for fire in the Catholic Church. Burning in unquenchable flames if I recall.”

“David subtly revoked that side of things. He said it was not God’s purpose to destroy people.”

“I hope not.”

Ben had inadvertently touched on something from Kath's past. She looked frightened, like a little girl.

"That's why I couldn't go back to a Church." She said. "All that Devil and Hellfire. It's completely counterproductive."

"I agree with you." Ben reassured her.

She seemed to calm down and asked Ben if he wanted more coffee.

Ben refused and got up to leave.

"I hope you find a good minister, darling. It's so important that you have someone sensible there."

"I hope so."

He kissed her and said goodbye.

On the way home Ben was kicking himself for bringing up David's Pentecost sermon. He should have known better. Kath was still sensitive to any sort of violence in the Bible. He would be more careful next time.

When the night of the dinner party arrived Ben sent Julian to get Robert who had been invited because he had met Barry Sutton before, a long time ago. Ben busied himself cooking the meal.

The doorbell rang and Barry and Claude stood smiling on the doorstep.

"Come in. Come in." Ben invited. "I've asked Robert, my brother, to come as well, I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"I should tell you," Ben began as he showed them upstairs to the long lounge room, "that Robert suffers from schizophrenia. I don't think he had been diagnosed before you left."

"How unfortunate." Barry was sympathetic. "I remember a rather unhappy young man."

"Yes he was. Now we know why."

Ben offered them drinks. Barry didn't drink but Claude accepted a brandy. Ben had just settled them in the green chairs when Julian arrived with Robert.

"Good timing." Ben introduced Barry and Claude and retired to serve the dinner.

During the meal Robert related his experiments with music.

“That’s an interesting observation.” Barry put in. “It is well known that certain types of music can put the mind into a meditative state.”

“I now think,” Robert continued, “that I was getting a negative spiritual influence from the rock music. Classical music is much better. The sacred music in particular creates a positive spiritual influence which is helpful.”

“That’s good.” Barry returned. “I don’t listen to much rock these days and Claude’s a classical buff, aren’t you.” Claude nodded and smiled shyly. “I listen to a bit of Indian classical music. I have a recording of the *Bhagavad Gita* - which is similar.”

Robert smiled. He was not thought strange by these guests.

They returned once again to the lounge room.

The sun was setting so Ben drew the rose velvet curtains. He put on some music in the background – Chopin’s *Nocturnes*.

“Does anyone want a drink?”

Claude and Julian accepted, Ben and Barry abstained.

Ben was keen to tackle Barry on some of the differences between western and eastern philosophical thought.

“Too much religion is in the mind. Meditation, beliefs. One of our theologians says ‘In the end life is more about the condition of your heart than your state of mind.’”

“Certainly yoga practices concentrate on controlling the mind and the thoughts but the heart is not altogether neglected. There are passages in the *Bhagavad Gita* which refer to the heart as a way to God. Most call it *Bakti Yoga* – the yoga of devotion.”

“That’s fascinating.” Ben remarked. “Martin Day, the theologian I quoted before, says that the heart is close to God. He claims to have spoken with God in person.”

“That’s certainly possible but it’s rare.” Barry looked more hopeful than sceptical.

“Martin Day is gay as well.”

“Really!” Barry was surprised.

“Most people think that spirituality and homosexuality are mutually exclusive” Ben observed.

“Not Martin Day obviously.”

“But we are ignoring the others.” Ben was apologetic.

Robert had a question for Barry :

“What does yoga say about the unconscious?”

“The unconscious mind,” Barry began, “is extremely powerful. What we think unconsciously affects what we feel and what we do. Some forms of yoga stimulate powers in the unconscious.”

“Because,” Robert continued, “I believe that the voices I hear come from my unconscious mind. It sort of manipulates unconscious images in the collective.”

“That’s more Jung than yoga but super-physical hearing is likened by some to music.” Barry seemed loath to say more.

“How do you like the Chopin?” Ben asked Claude.

“Excellent .” Claude smiled. “I love the nocturnes especially.”

“I have the etudes as well but I thought the nocturnes at night.....” Ben looked at Julian who had been very quiet. “Julian’s working with *The Anti-Violence Group* aren’t you.”

“That sounds like a good cause.” Claude was impressed.

“We’ve got some of our posters into the AFL clubs it’s quite a coup.”

“Indeed.”

“The New South Wales chapter want to get them into the NRL as well.”

“That would certainly help. A lot of violence and homophobia comes from sport. They influence young people as well” Claude noted.

Julian refrained from mentioning the Grand Final.

The evening then wound down to a quiet close.

Barry offered to drive Robert home and the guests were gone by 10:30 pm.

Ben loaded up the dishwasher as Julian retired to his room. They were both tired and after finishing in the kitchen Ben went up to his room and was soon fast asleep.

22 June 2009

Dear Isabel,

I have enjoyed the two sessions of *The Progressive Net* so far and wondered if I may make a suggestion.

Thus far we have had all Christian speakers and we have benefited greatly from their erudite observations.

I was wondering, however, whether it would be possible to include some comparative religion in the future.

I see the future of world religion as more universal, more trans-cultural.

I have had some contact with eastern religions as you know and I feel that their sacred writings would benefit from the kind of scrutiny to which the Christian scriptures have been subjected.

Do you know if there are any progressive Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, or Jews?

I have heard of liberal Jews but I'm not sure about the other religions.

There was a young Muslim woman on the radio who was looking at the Koran in a new way but I can't remember her name.

Some of the ideas of Sufism and Taoism are similar to the ideas being explored by Progressive Christians. Perhaps it would be possible to include some of their writings.

In any case I hope you will understand the nature of my request and the possibility of accommodating this in the future.

Yours Sincerely,
Ben Taylor.

26 June 2009

Dear Ben,

Thank you for your comments about multi-faith issues.

At this stage we have decided to stick to Christian speakers.

It may be possible to include some multi-faith material at a later date. None of us is sure of the quality of other faith studies. There certainly doesn't seem to be the same progressive momentum outside the Christian Churches.

If something comes up that we feel is up to the standard of the speakers we've had so far we will certainly consider it.

Thank you again for your interest.

Yours Sincerely,
Isabel Bennett.

It was the 30th of June and Ben was in his office sorting out accounts for his tax return when the doorbell rang.

When he answered Tyrone and Amos were waiting outside. Steven Reynolds was close behind.

Amos's appeal had been rejected. He had been ordered to leave the country immediately. They were on the run.

"We came here so they can't trace us." Tyrone explained.

Steven Reynolds took control. "I have a property in outback New South Wales. You can go there."

"What will they do for work?" Ben was alarmed.

"It's a small farm. You can manage that for me indefinitely. You'll need new names of course."

"We'll think about that on the way." Tyrone was close to the edge.

“Julian, can you drive them?” asked Steven. “They could trace Tyrone’s car and we can’t leave yours there. You’ll have to drive back.”

“Sure”

Steven wrote down directions. “Have you got a map?”

“We’ll get one at the service station.” Julian was getting the spirit of adventure.

“Money.”

Ben gave Julian all his spare cash. “You can use my credit card.” Julian had a second card.

“Don’t use yours Tyrone, they could trace it.”

“Right.”

They removed all the luggage from Tyrone’s car and transferred it to Julian’s hatchback and they were soon on their way.

“I’ll take care of Tyrone’s car.” Ben had the keys.

“Get it as far away as you can then dump it.”

Ben saw Steven off.

He put on his driving gloves and drove Tyrone’s car down to the Yarra River and left it in a secluded car park. He threw the keys into the water.

He caught a taxi home and had to use his credit card because he had given Julian all his cash. He hoped that they couldn’t trace it. He may have to concoct a story.

When he got home the big house seemed very empty. It was a long time since he had spent the night alone. He went through all the details of their plan and was satisfied that it was water tight.

He said prayers for Tyrone and Amos and Julian who would be close to the state border by now.

He found it difficult to sleep. He kept going over and over the plan.

Eventually, close to dawn, he fell asleep.

He dreamed that he was at the races. The horse that he had picked in the first race was scratched so he didn’t have a bet.

The second race he backed the winner. The third race he put money on the winner again. He backed the winners of the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth races. He couldn’t believe what had happened – he had virtually picked the card.

He woke up and recalled the dream. What could it mean?

Suddenly he remembered what had happened. Julian wasn't there. He was in the house alone.

After a late brunch he rang Bronwyn.

"Do you have a dream interpretation book?" Ben enquired.

"I don't always use the books these days. Most of them are old and out of date. Did you have a dream?"

Ben related his dream to Bronwyn.

"I see." She crooned. "I'll have a look in the book but I don't place too much emphasis on it."

There was a short silence while Bronwyn found her dream book.

"Right. Being at a racecourse means new interests and surroundings. Your race horse winning means you have many enemies." There was a pause. "Winning a bet means a change for the better." She paused again. "What does the dream mean to you?"

"I can't imagine that it could be bad. It seems to mean that I have the right answers."

"It could mean that. The number seven is highly symbolic in dreams. You know the story of Pharaoh and the seven years of plenty and famine. If we skip the first race and take the seven races as seven years then after one year of indifferent fortune you should have seven years of good luck and new interests. That would be my interpretation. Does that help?"

"A bit. I'll have to think about it. Thanks anyway."

Ben rang off and tried to decipher the interpretations. He decided that Bronwyn was right about the seven years and it meant that after one year he would have the right answers.

This kept him occupied for some time. He was half expecting the doorbell to ring. He couldn't telephone Steven to talk about it – they could trace phone calls. He hoped that everyone knew what not to do.

By dusk there had been no visit from the police and Ben began to relax. They had got away with it. The police would never find them.

That night he dreamed again. The exact same dream. The first horse was scratched then he won seven races in a row.

In the morning he decided that his interpretation had been validated. The repetition of the dream was a confirmation of the message. After one year he would have the right answers.

The next night he had the dream again. He couldn't believe it in the morning. He had never had a repeating dream before! He wasn't used to extreme good fortune but the dream suggested nothing less.

The following day Julian arrived home late in the evening.

"How did it go?" Ben asked him as soon as he came through the door.

"All safe and sound."

Ben hugged Julian and kissed him passionately.

Julian had slept only a few hours in the car on the return trip so he was exhausted.

"Can I sleep with you tonight?" He requested.

"Sure."

"And I do mean sleep."

"I understand."

He fell asleep in Ben's arms. Ben held him tight in an unconscious embrace. The lovers' plight had touched all their hearts.

They had chosen names during the long drive north. Tyrone would be William Goodman, Bill for short, and Amos was given a less threatening name, Joseph Gowon.

Ben drove Julian over to Steven's house to let him know the new names. Steven would have to contact the new managers by email at the farm.

Arrangements had been made to accommodate the old manager. He would be given a better job in Steven's Brisbane business. The housekeeper at the farm had been alerted to their arrival. She was trustworthy and would not ask questions.

So all was in place by the time they left Steven's house.

Sunday was an anticlimax after the excitement of the last few days.

Ben was distracted and sleepy and only caught half of John Dowd's introduction to the story of Joseph.

During the silences Ben prayed for Tyrone and Amos, or Bill and Joe as they would be from now on. He asked God to bless their love and their new life and keep their home secret

from the authorities. He thought of the holy family's flight into Egypt. God had warned Joseph in a dream.....

"Then Joseph had another dream and said to his brothers, 'I had another dream in which I saw the sun, the moon and eleven stars bowing down to me.'"(GNB)

This was not Jesus father but Jacob's son. It was he who had interpreted Pharaoh's dream of seven years of plenty and seven years of famine.

He tried to remember how long the drought had lasted in outback Australia. He hoped that the lovers would be alright.

Joseph's youngest brother was called Benjamin. It was he who had inspired Joseph's tears. Ben felt somehow intertwined with this story of jealousy, hardship, and love.

"....his heart was full of tender feelings for his brother. He was about to break down so he went to his room and cried."(GNB)

Ben thought of the fugitive lovers. They had helped them without hesitating. There was no question of betrayal. He wondered where this came from.

"God sent me ahead of you to rescue you in this amazing way and to make sure that you and your descendants survive."(GNB)

The story of Joseph was at an end. John began to sum up.

"So God had used the malice and hatred of Joseph's brothers to save his beloved people. If Joseph had not been sold into slavery in Egypt the tribes of Israel would not have survived."

The July meeting of *The Progressive Net* was to follow a different format. Isabel herself was to give three short talks between which the assembled audience was to discuss what had been said. The topic was *Why does God allow bad things to happen?*

The first talk examined who was doing the things in question. Isabel suggested that it was not God's doing but human beings acting of their own free will. She said it was unfair to blame God for what we did to each other.

Ben was at a table with Colin Pierce and Margery Mason from St. Aiden's. David Atkins, Beth and Rose from the discussion group were also present but they were not at Ben's table.

A woman in her sixties introduced herself as Ruth. "It's all very well not to blame God," she said, "but He allows it to happen. What kind of God stands by and watches?"

"It's traditionally thought to relate to free will" Colin ventured.

"Yes, if God was to stop everyone who was going to do something bad He'd be interfering with us all day. It would be chaos." A quietly spoken man with a round face called Alistair observed.

"And when would we learn not to do bad things ourselves?" A man called Paul agreed.

"It's out of compassion for others suffering that we grow. That doesn't make their suffering good but good can come from it." Margery contributed.

The second talk was about natural justice. Isabel contended that this was a human invention and not part of the divine nature at all. Rewards and punishments from God were scarce on the ground in human experience.

This caused a minor uproar in the crowd.

"What is God if not just?" Ruth was aghast.

"I think she's saying that we project our ideas of justice onto God." Ben was cautious. "I don't think that God rewards and punishes us according to our behavior."

"What does God do then? If you follow that line of thought there's nothing left." Audrey was alarmed.

Next Isabel quoted *Matthew 5* :

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.' But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become children of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil

"Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the publicans do that! You must be perfect - just as your Father in heaven is perfect!"(GNB)

She added that the word *perfect* could also be translated as *all good*.

"She chose the right passage to back up her argument" Colin prompted.

"What do you mean?" Audrey sounded worried.

"He makes his sun to rise on the bad and the good, and his rain to fall on the good and the evil." Colin summarized. "That means that God does not judge in the way that we do."

Audrey seemed to understand that and relaxed back in her seat.

"I agree with Colin" Ben said. "It makes more sense than the idea that God is in control of everything."

"The book of Job deals with that I think" Colin responded.

Isabel had one last comment : "Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing."(GNB)

With this she thanked her audience and sat down.

There was warm applause and then chaotic activity as everyone tried to collapse their tables and stack their chairs.

"That went well" Ben said to Margery.

"Yes. It's a tricky topic."

"But I think we got some insight towards the end."

"I think so too" Margery smiled.

Some of the others were not looking so happy. Ruth and Audrey were frowning.

Ben waved to Beth and Rose across the chaos then set out for the car park.

He thought that Isabel had handled the subject better than he had expected. He felt happy with her thesis and hummed to himself as he drove home.

During the next month Ben had a series of experiences which confirmed Philip Newberry's theory about celebrity culture.

The first of these was a trip to the movies. Julian was a big comic book buff and when a particular character appeared on celluloid Ben was obliged to accompany him to the cinema.

The film was dark to say the least. The hero was more violent, more malevolent, more menacing than the villains. He recalled the X anti-heroes of the 1980s. The film had been called anti-human by groups in America and was subsequently nominated for 10 Academy Awards.

Ben wondered what sort of person would make such a movie and the answer he came up with was a Satanist. The movie was pure black propaganda.

Of course he didn't say any of this to Julian who seemed oblivious to the dark side of his hero. To him it was just escapist fun.

A few days later Ben was watching television and an advertisement came on for a touring rock band. Skulls, snakes, flames, tattoos, screaming, demonic laughter, all dressed in black. dagger through the heart and the sign of the devil left no doubt about the Satanic nature of this band. On the same night, however, the new tour from a female pop star featured many of the same symbols hidden behind sugary pop music and sexy male dancers.

Philip had said that all rock musicians were involved in the conspiracy of darkness and these two advertisements confirmed that.

Later in the month he was leafing through a magazine in a bookshop when he came across an interview with the female pop star in question. It was entitled *Fame will make you happy* and in it the star put forward a series of statements which contradicted everything that Ben had ever been taught. She embraced materialism, casual sex, drug use, fast cars, toy boys, money, and violence. Ben was totally repulsed by her philosophy and went on to read about her life as the mother of three adopted children. Her current partner was the director of the comic book film that had so offended Ben a few weeks earlier.

Ben could see the extent of the web of evil that Philip had revealed to him and vowed to be more careful about what he watched and listened to in the future.

He went to visit Robert, who was thriving on his new diet of classical and sacred music. Robert had told him that he was careful about what he watched on television and Ben could now see why.

"I've come to a kind of understanding of my illness." Robert informed him. "It's like the collective unconscious. You don't just hear your own voice you hear other people's voices. And there are various levels. Like the first level is family, the next deeper level is community, then society, and then the whole world. And the relationships are not spacial they are relational. Like resonance."

"Resonance?"

“Yes. Resonance is when two distant objects react in the same way at the same time. Like twins.”

“I see. And what does your doctor say about this?”

“He doesn’t seem very interested. He just prescribes medication. He thinks it’s all biological I think” Robert concluded.

“And you think there’s more to it.”

“Yes. It matters what the voices are saying. There are issues which reflect your position in society. Society’s perception of you. And the content of the voices and images shows what that is. And there’s a spiritual aspect to it that I was unaware of before. Since I’ve cut out the rock music and substituted choral music the voices have changed. They are much more helpful and actually resolve some of the problems rather than making them worse which is what’s been happening for twenty years.”

“So you feel you’re on top if it at last.”

“Yes, almost completely.”

Ben left feeling buoyant and relieved. Things were starting to fall into place.

When Ben spoke to Philip after Church he told Ben that he had written an open letter to the newspapers but it had been rejected. He was in the process of creating a web site to warn young people about the dangers of Satanism in the popular culture.

Ben asked him what kind of content was on the web site.

“General information about what to look for. You can’t use names for legal reasons so you have to hint, but that’s not too hard. You find at first that people take everything at face value, they don’t look beyond the surface but that’s exactly where they should be looking – in the background, under the mask, at the secret messages in the lyrics.”

“Like semiotics....” Ben suggested.

“Precisely. If you start from the right standpoint you begin to see.”

Ben told Philip about his brother Robert’s continued recovery and his confirmation of Philip’s observations.

Ben wished him well with his new cyber venture.

By September St. Aiden's had a new minister. His name was Norman Wright. He was in his fifties and had experience in country and metropolitan parishes.

His first service was conventional and Ben noted that the prayer of confession was included, something which neither Isabel nor the interim ministers had done. This was not a good sign.

The sermon was an orthodox interpretation of the lectionary reading from *Mark* where Jesus curses the fig tree.

Ben went home feeling disappointed and nervous but he wouldn't judge the new minister on one hearing. He would wait and see.

Over the next few weeks Ben was not encouraged. Norman Wright stuck strictly to the lectionary and his interpretations did not deviate from the orthodox. His sermons were uninspiring and intellectually dull.

Norman Wright was friendly and positive on a personal level but Ben noted that his handshake was weak – *a wet fish* was the expression.

Ben now began to realize how spoiled they had been. Isabel had been brave and unorthodox and the interim ministers had included modern interpretations of scripture. Norman Wright, however, was neither brave nor modern, his services were a disappointment.

Others put on a brave face and spoke well of him but Ben could see them drifting during the services and numbers had begun to drop.

There was no theological discussion after services and the only group available was a Bible study taken by Norman himself.

His wife Dorothy was involved with the women's group and stuck to the role of supportive wife.

Ben asked Philip what he thought of the new minister.

"He's not very inspiring, not like Isabel" he replied. "I went to see him about my past experiences. He was non-committal. He offered prayers."

"I haven't tackled him on the gay issue yet. It was supposed to be part of the requirements for ministry so he must have O.K.'d it but I'm not sure about him."

Several weeks later Norman spoke on 1 Corinthians 6 : the infamous list of those who would not inherit the Kingdom of God which included homosexual perverts.

Ben asked to speak to the minister after the service and when Ben challenged him on *homosexual perverts* his response was evasive :

“I believe,” he began, “that if you deviate from the simple faith of your childhood then you are lost.”

What did that mean?

“Are you saying that homosexuals like myself will not go to heaven?” Ben demanded.

Norman paused then looked at him sadly and said, “Sometimes I think that we prefer the old slaveries to the new life offered in the Gospels.”

Ben knew what that meant. He was a slave to sin. He thanked Norman for his time and left at once.

It was after this meeting that Ben decided to look for a new church. He didn't want to leave the Church altogether so he would have to see if he could find a minister who would accept him and his ideas.

He thought of Isabel. St. Steven's was a good hour's drive from Ben's home but it might be worth it if there was nothing closer. He tried a couple of local churches but they were either without a permanent minister or not theologically compatible.

He prayed about it each night before he went to bed and at last he tried St. James' Chapel which was a tiny church not far from his home. The minister there was a man called Vivian Marrow. He was about forty five years old and tall and slim.

The first Sunday that Ben went to St. James' was *All Saints' Day*. Vivian spoke well on the festival which had originally been *All Martyrs' Day* on May 13th but had been moved to November 1st.

This had been the time when herds returned from pasture and land tenures were renewed. It was also the time when the souls of the departed visited their homes, hence Halloween on October 31st.

Now the festival was a celebration of saints known and unknown. Vivian suggested that members of the congregation could consider themselves unknown saints and today was in honor of them.

Ben thought that the sermon was well researched and generous.

After the service, while mixing, Ben was introduced to a small, plump woman in her fifties called Roseanne Mancini. When Ben mentioned that he had been at St. Aiden's she asked if he knew Rose De Boer.

"Yes. Rose is wonderful. She was in my discussion group. She's a lovely old lady and very thoughtful."

"Rose is my mother. I was named after her and my grandmother Anne."

"Both strong Christians I take it."

"Anne was a preacher in her own right, very spiritual and forthright. And you know my mother."

"Yes, and Mancini is Italian?"

"Yes. Paolo and I have been married for thirty years."

"Do you have any children?"

"Two girls – Anne and Rose."

"I see. The family tradition."

"Paolo and I agreed if they were boys he could name them, If they were girls I could."

"Your father is dead now isn't he."

"Yes. Dad was Dutch, Dutch-Indonesian. He was in a P.O.W. camp during World War Two. He didn't live long. He died when he was sixty-three."

Ben caught sight of the minister. "Excuse me will you. I just want to catch the minister before I go."

"I hope you like it here" were her parting words.

Ben approached Vivian Marrow and asked if he could make a time to speak with him privately. Vivian said he would have to check his diary and to ring on Tuesday. The phone number was in the notice sheet.

Ben agreed and said his goodbyes.

When Ben went to see Vivian Marrow he took with him the letter from Philip Newberry. He wasn't sure whether there would be an appropriate moment to show him the letter but he wanted to have it with him just in case.

Vivian was alone in the tiny office. He offered Ben a seat then enquired about the purpose of his visit.

"I have been looking for a new congregation to join."

“And what brings you here?”

“I tried a number of churches in this area but none of them was quite right. I have some special requirements you might say.” He paused. “I am openly gay and my theological views are progressive.”

“I see.”

“You can imagine.....” Ben left it to his imagination.

“Were you attending a church before this?”

“Yes, I was at St. Aiden’s. The new minister and I didn’t see eye to eye shall we say.”

“No. Norman’s not really progressive.”

“I was impressed by your sermon on *All Saints Day* and I wanted to meet you in person to see if St. James’ might be a welcoming place for me?”

“Well I can assure you that St. James’ is a welcoming congregation. As for homosexuality,” he didn’t beat around the bush, “I have no problem with that. I know several homosexual ministers in our Church and I have always found them caring and compassionate people.” He paused. “As for the theological side of things most would call me open to progressive ideas. I certainly am not opposed to progressive positions.”

“Good.” Ben was feeling better. “So for example AIDS is not a punishment from God for the abomination of homosexuality?”

“That position has now been discredited I think with the numbers of women and children contracting the disease in Africa and Asia.” Vivian was calm and composed.

“Gays in Heaven?”

“I see no problem with that.”

Ben was pleased. What more could he ask? “Well I think I’ve found myself a new church.” He concluded.

“I hope you have.”

Ben remembered the letter. “I received this letter from someone at St. Aiden’s. I would be interested to hear your opinion of it.” He handed him the letter.

Vivian showed no surprise as he read through the letter. He thought for a minute before responding. “Rock bands are doing this quite openly these days. I can imagine that it might become a concern if you are too close to them.”

“He says that it’s subversive – a web of evil – to ensnare people, tempt them, and lead them to damnation.”

“It’s certainly an eye opener.”

“It is.”

Ben thanked him for his time and shook his hand. He noted that Vivian's handshake was quite firm, that was reassuring. He left feeling optimistic about his new place in the Church.

When he arrived home Julian asked him how it went.

"Very well. I think I'll be O.K. there."

"Good." Julian was concerned despite himself. "What's he like?"

"He seems very straight forward and genuine. His handshake is firm."

"No limp wrist." Julian jested.

"No limp wrist. You know I was beginning to wonder if there was still a place for me in the Church. An openly gay man I mean."

"I know what you mean."

"St. James' was almost my last chance. I'm glad it's worked out alright. So far anyway."

After a light lunch Ben retired to his study where he thanked God for his new home.

When he had finished his prayer he put the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* on the C.D. player. He thought about gay men who were suffering with AIDS and gay people suffering persecution. The perfect choral harmonies flowed one into another until the final line of each lectio which exhorted Israel to turn once again to God.

The music was like the voices of angels supplicating God on behalf of the suffering – at once sad and spiritual.

Ben felt tears coming to his eyes. Far from feeling embarrassed, as he might if Julian was present, Ben was comfortable with his tears. It seemed appropriate to weep over the suffering they had all been through and this brought him closer to God.

"Tears melt the heart." He recalled the words of Martin Day, and it was true. God was close to the heart. He said a prayer of thanks.

On Saturday the 28th of November Ben and Julian were watching the evening news when a report came on about a demonstration in favor of gay marriage. There had been rallies held in several state capitals attended by thousands of people. The report ended with the promise of a year of action in 2010.

"I hadn't heard about that." Ben complained.

"I heard something at work but I didn't think you'd be interested." Julian was casual.

"Well I am interested. Marriage would normalize homosexual relations, not to mention what it would do to the Church."

"Did you want to go?"

"Probably."

"It's on next year. There's a web site I think."

"Can you get the dates for me?"

"Sure."

"I might put something in to the Church newspaper."

"That's a good idea. I'll look up the web site and get the dates."

The next day was the first day of Advent and the first candle, the candle of hope, was lit. Over the next three weeks the candles of peace, joy, and love would be lit before the Christ candle on Christmas day.

Vivian's handling of the stories of Jesus birth was sensitive and erudite. He did not launch into a full scale debunking of the fairytale story but mentioned the anomalies while maintaining a reverent attitude.

There were Christmas carols and special music. There was a drama for the children on Christmas day and all in all Ben's Christmas season passed without too much conflict.

The new year was a different matter.

PART 3.

To Ben the new church was simply another well in which he contacted the same reservoir of subterranean water. God was the same whether at St. Aiden's or St. James'.

What he had forgotten, however, was that Church people were very reserved and it took a long time to make new friends there.

Ben set about making himself useful. He volunteered for morning tea duties, and counting the collection, and the power point projection which the congregation followed on the big screen beside the sanctuary.

Later he would join some of the small groups run at St. James' and would get to know people better. It was difficult to create anything more than superficial relationships after services but he persevered meeting several dynamic and thoughtful people.

Rhonda was a stout woman in her sixties. She was involved in everything and when Ben spoke to her about Vivian's sermons she was intelligent and clear. Her husband Neil was a gentle man of few words but when he did speak his comments were pertinent and charitable.

Jeremy, the organist, was enthusiastic and cultured. His choice of music for interludes was surprisingly broad, ranging from 1920s musicals to Bach fugues. His wife Phyllis was always talkative and busy.

Naomi often said the prayers of intercession and her spirituality was evident in her reflective words. In private conversation she was equally perspicacious. Her husband didn't come to church so Ben would often speak to her as they were both alone.

Vivian's wife Constance was involved with the children, mostly grandchildren, who sometimes accompanied the older people to church. She was very inventive and artistic and her conversation was bright and sincere.

Despite the small numbers St. James' congregation was spiritual and enlightened. Much of the credit for this lay with Vivian himself who preached the gospel of love rather than old fashioned moral imperatives. He said that fear made our hearts hard and we should strive to overcome our fears with the help of God's love. He encouraged us to pray about our

fears and our questions, not to shy away from controversial issues, and to talk to each other about what we have learned.

Often he would use music with visual images to emphasize a message rather than relying solely on words which can become so arid and cerebral.

He always brought us back to love. To love God and love our neighbor. To love even our enemies and turn the other cheek. To become all good as God is all good.

So, far from being disappointed with his move, Ben found that his own spirituality was enhanced. He was very happy with his new home.

The first gay marriage demonstration for the year was on March 13th. Julian didn't want to go so Ben decided to take the train rather than drive his car into the city.

When he arrived at the State Library the crowd was sparse but as the clock approached 1:00 pm more people began to appear. The crowd was casually dressed, mostly in jeans and t-shirts. Ben was surprised that they didn't dress up more. It lent a depressed atmosphere to the gathering. Rainbows and pink were reserved for banners and signs.

There were quite a few speakers – gay and lesbian activists, unionists, student representatives, and politicians. The crowd response was muted and they had to be whipped up by the presiding drag queen.

It was a good hour before they began to march. Ben estimated the crowd at about 1,000 which was disappointing. They marched down Swanson Street chanting and shouting slogans – “What do we want? Same sex marriage! When do we want it? Now!”, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, homophobia's got to go!”, “Gay, straight, black or white, marriage is a civil right!”

They turned into Collins Street and proudly marched past the startled shoppers up to the State Government Offices where the Registry Office was located.

There they held an impromptu mass wedding ceremony. Dozens of couples took their vows from the official celebrant and sealed the occasion with passionate kissing.

The crowd then began to disperse.

Ben took the steep escalator at Parliament Station down to the lowest level of the underground and caught the train home.

Julian was waiting for him when he arrived.

“Did it go alright?”

“The crowd was a bit disappointing but it was fun. Marching’s fun you know.”

“Is it?” Julian sounded dubious.

That evening Ben watched the news with interest but the demonstration was not reported. He decided that the reason for this was the lack of interest in either political party. The issue was just not vital enough to report. Ben found this depressing and when he told Julian that he was thinking of writing a letter to his Church’s newspaper to coincide with the May 15th demonstration his lover said that May 17th was planned as the first *International Day Against Homophobia* and Ben should include that information with a notice about the demonstration. IDAHO, as it was called, had been initiated in Canada in 2003 and more than 50 countries would celebrate it this year. May 17th had been chosen because that was the date that the World Health Organization had removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses in 1990.

Julian told Ben that this year they were concentrating on homophobia in sport.

On Good Friday Vivian’s sermon picked up the theme of the rose and its accompanying thorns.

Jesus was a prophet of love and love brought with it trouble.

He read an anonymous poem :

*“The Rose is the Love,
The Thorns are the Passions crucified,
The Pain is the Ransom,
The Ring is the Marriage.*

*“The Tears are His Pity,
The Sighs are His Breath,
The Heartbeats are His Life,
The Bridegroom is Himself.”*

Vivian had placed a large wooden cross on a black cloth over the steps to the sanctuary. At the ends of the front pews were bowls of deep red rose petals.

As Tchaikovsky's carol *Crown of Roses* was played people gradually left their seats and moved forward to drop petals over the cross.

When Ben returned to his seat he turned to looked at the cross. The effect was dramatic. The red rose petals looked like drops of blood – the traditional symbol of the crucifixion – but he knew that they were not drops of blood, they were red rose petals – the symbol of passionate love.

4 April 2010

The Editor,

1 *Samuel* 18 :

“.....Saul's son Jonathan was deeply attracted to David and came to love him as much as he loved himself.....

“.....Jonathan swore eternal friendship with David because of his deep affection for him. He took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, together with his armour and also his sword, bow, and belt.”(GNB)

There is no passage in the Bible which sounds more like gay marriage than this passage. Even the queer transsexual passages in *Song of Solomon* do not compare.

It far outweighs the brief and questionable passages in *Genesis* and *Leviticus*.

The campaign for gay marriage in the Church is seeking God's blessing on gay relationships. Not only does this encourage faithfulness, which I believe is the natural orientation of passion, but it obviates any residual homophobia for which the Church has been responsible in the past.

Allowing gays to marry in the Church will reconcile homosexual people, who have been told that they are not acceptable, to God and put them on an equal footing with heterosexual couples.

For far too long gay people have been told that they are second class citizens, or even non-citizens, in the Kingdom of God. Gay marriage is the best way to rectify this imbalance.

God does not discriminate between homosexual and heterosexual people. The Church should not do so either.

I believe that the overwhelming impetus of the campaign will see gays marrying in the Church in the near future.

Our Church is at the forefront of progressive change. Society will commend us if we have the courage to institute equality and allow gay people to marry.

*A demonstration is planned for May 15 at 1:00pm starting from the State Library in the city.

*The first *International Day Against Homophobia* will be May 17.

Yours Sincerely,

Ben Taylor.

A meeting of *The Progressive Net* was scheduled for April 18th. The topic was *Perspectives* and the guest speaker was Dianne Norris, a practicing minister in her forties.

“When we were young,” she began, “we read about Alexander, Julius Caesar and Napoleon - and history called them great. We were encouraged to admire their military achievements. “When we went to Sunday school we were encouraged to emulate Jesus and the disciples, to aspire to spiritual values and good works.

“What nobody told us was that the Bible calls both Alexander and Julius Caesar *beasts*. And in *War and Peace* Napoleon is likewise called *The Beast*.

“Our parents were no help in this matter. They were as confused as we were.

“It took me a long time to realize that you can’t do both. You can’t succeed in the world and aspire to spiritual values as well. One seems to cancel out the other.

“Jesus was not a success by worldly standards despite posthumous attempts to rectify this.

“The Biblical perspective on the world is that it is full of temptations and false gods. It is certainly difficult to serve worldly gods and God as well.

“Nobody tells you that it was Jesus spirituality that got him crucified. Had he not told the truth and claimed to be the son of God he would not have been killed. This claim threatened the authority of the Pharisees who were God’s representatives on earth. They did not share power.

“And Jesus being called *King of the Jews* was a challenge to Caesar’s power. These were the words nailed to the cross with him.

“Jesus says that the way of the world is evil. Some call the worldly powers, secular and religious, fallen.

“By reading the Bible with a keen eye we gain a new perspective on life and living that at last makes sense of our experiences.”

She called for questions.

A young man in his twenties stood up and accepted the microphone.

“Are you saying that Jesus authority challenges worldly authority?”

Dianne hesitated for a moment then said, “Yes. Next question?”

There was general laughter then an elderly woman took the microphone.

“I have never really thought of it quite like that before. We were taught to respect authority or cop a belting. And authority – worldly or otherwise – was unquestioned.

“What I would like to know is why this *perspective* as you call it was never taught in our day.”

“Thank you for your question.” Dianne was respectful. “I believe that these things have been known to Biblical scholars for some time but that this was not preached in churches precisely for the reasons that you gave yourself.

“Authority was unquestioned and the Church’s authority had, since Constantine, been bound up with the authority of the state. Therefore we were encouraged to obey worldly authority without question. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

A man of thirty asked : “That’s all very well but we all have to work – men and women – how can we reconcile our spirituality, our Christianity, with working for the Beast, or these fallen powers?”

“That’s a very good question. We all have to eat.” She paused for a moment. “You must be true to your own spiritual values and not put them aside for the sake of expediency. If this brings you into conflict with your employer then so be it.

“I don’t know if that will help but that’s the only answer I can give you.”

The man looked disappointed and sat down.

There were no more questions so, after helping to tidy up, Ben left for home.

As he drove he thought about Dianne’s perspective. Ben was lucky – he was his own boss – he did not need to accommodate an employer, but life still threw up dilemmas. He thought of the workers on his building site. He thought of Steven Reynolds, and Tyrone and Amos. It was true. If you practiced spiritual values it brought you into conflict with the world. He remembered as a child looking in his pictorial history book at the marvelous warriors and soldiers. He now realized they were brutal and cruel. He also realized that the epithet *Great* was in adoration of *The Beast*.

Things were becoming clearer.

During the following week Ben received a phone call from the editor of his Church’s newspaper. She agreed to publish his letter but wanted to make it shorter, cutting out the Biblical references at the beginning.

Ben felt relieved that the letter was to be published at all so he didn’t argue the point and thanked her for her help. He was unsure whether the information about the demonstration and IDAHO would be included.

Julian was mildly surprised when Ben told him that his letter was to be published. Ben said not to expect too much.

Julian was silent, brooding.

When the first Sunday in May came and the new edition of the Church paper was available Ben was slightly nervous. He was in effect announcing that he was gay to the whole congregation, and the wider Church for that matter. Most of them would read the letter during the week so there may not be any immediate reactions.

Vivian Marrow greeted him as he entered St. James' Chapel. "I saw your letter in the paper." He offered his hand. "Congratulations."

"Yes. I wasn't sure whether it would be published or not."

"It's a very good letter. Constance was particularly impressed."

"Thank you." Ben smiled. "We'll wait and see if there are any responses."

Ben picked up a copy of the newspaper and turned the pages to the letters. He noticed that the information about the demonstration and IDAHO were not included.

The day's reading from Acts was Peter's vision of animals declared fit to eat by God and his subsequent meeting with Cornelius. It concluded : "Then God has given to the Gentiles also the opportunity to repent and live!"(GNB)

The second reading was from *John* 13 : Jesus final commandment to his disciples to love one another.

Vivian spoke of inclusion in the love of God and our love for each other. Ben prayed that *Equal Love* the title that had been given to the gay marriage demonstrations would qualify for inclusion.

After the service he spoke to several people but none of them had yet read his letter. He would have to wait another week for their reactions.

When Ben showed Julian the letter he was a bit miffed about the exclusions but was overall pleased that the letter had seen the light of day.

"Perhaps there's hope for them after all." Julian smirked.

Ben was surprised by Julian's remark but decided to say nothing.

Ben met Philip Newberry at a local café. After Philip congratulated him on his letter Ben asked him how he was getting on with Norman Wright at St. David's.

"Not the best," was his comment, "I'm afraid I find him boring."

"Yes. We were rather spoiled with Isabel and the three wise men." Ben paused to assess Philip's mood. "Have you thought of going somewhere else?"

"I didn't want to go to all the trouble of changing. I know the people at St. David's but I'm not getting anything out of the services."

“Would you consider coming to St. James’ Chapel with me?”

“What’s the minister there like?” Philip was cautious.

“He’s fine. Vivian Marrow is his name. I showed him your letter.”

“What did he say?”

“He said rock bands were openly worshipping Satan these days.”

“That’s more than Norman said.”

“I can imagine.”

Philip thought for a moment. “I suppose it wouldn’t do any harm to give it a try” he concluded.

“Good. Sunday then?”

“Sunday.”

That Sunday when Ben arrived at Church he was congratulated by Tony Sanders who was one of the older parishioners.

“I saw your letter,” he said, “and I totally agree with what you said. It should be the same for gay people as it is for men and women.”

Ben was thrilled. There were no negative reactions at all and the general consensus was that Ben was very courageous.

Philip Newberry arrived and Ben introduced him around.

They sat together as Vivian commenced the service.

One of the readings was from Revelation – New Jerusalem descending from Heaven and the river of the water of life, “sparkling like crystal”(GNB), flowing from the throne of God and flanked by the tree of life with its twelve monthly fruits.

Ben pondered the reading. People accepted the words without analyzing what they meant. He had always found them uplifting but what did they actually mean? New Jerusalem represented the new covenant between God and mankind but what were the waters of life and the fruits of the tree of life?

Vivian spoke about the promise given to us which is symbolized by the vision. It was not a literal city but a place within the Church. He did not comment on the waters or the fruits but emphasized our relationship with God.

After the service Philip seemed happy with Vivian's approach. Ben invited him to come again. He promise that he would.

The next Saturday was the second gay marriage demonstration and Julian decided to accompany Ben to the rally.

They caught the train to Melbourne Central and as soon as they emerged into the light it was evident that there were many more people than the previous gathering.

There were political groups giving out newspapers and leaflets, stalls selling badges and flags, colorful banners and posters, and drag queens with big hair.

One of the speakers was a famous gay actor who was in town doing a play. The other speakers were the usual mix of activists and politicians.

Julian seemed to enjoy stopping the traffic and demanding everyone's attention but he was not keen on chanting. Julian had always disapproved of dissidence, he thought it was wrongheaded, but once he got into the spirit of things he relaxed and afterwards admitted to Ben that it was fun.

That night the demonstration was on three of the four television news reports. Ben decided that this was because a celebrity had spoken at the rally. He said as much to Julian.

"I didn't know you were so cynical."

"It's not cynicism its realism."

Julian's wry smile said it all.

Bronwyn rang to tell Ben about the activity in the heavens. On June 8th the first conjunction of Jupiter and Uranus was to occur at 0° Aries. This was significant because 0° of the cardinal signs were what was called the world points because they coincided with the equinoxes and solstices.

Jupiter governed sport and Uranus governed homosexuality.

There would be two more conjunctions one retrograde at 29° Pisces on September 19th and the final direct conjunction at 27° Pisces on January 4th 2011.

After that Jupiter and Uranus progressed into Aries.

After the final opposition of Saturn and Uranus at 0° Libra/Aries on the 26th of July 2010 opposition to the gay agenda should begin to scale down.

Ben ventured to write to the new Prime Minister about the issue of gay marriage.

He received no reply.

Within days it became obvious that she was not going to change the party's position that marriage was between a man and a woman.

This decision roused naked hostility from within the gay community.

Julian and Ben were invited to lunch at Barry Sutton's Sandringham home. Barry lived in a 1970s style, split level, brick veneer house with a flat roof and huge wooden beams. It was within walking distance of the beach but had no view of the sea.

They were met at the door by Barry and Claude and shown into the spacious lounge room. The house was decorated with Indian wall hangings and carved wooden tables and chairs, some of which were inlaid with mother of pearl. The only European element was a large painting of a precipitous, red mountain.

They sat on the saffron colored lounge suite.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea or a cool drink?" Barry enquired.

Ben declined but Julian asked for a mineral water.

Claude commented on the publicity about homophobia in sport.

"Yes. It's quite incredible." Julian beamed.

"Divine providence perhaps." Barry had reappeared with Julian's drink. He placed it on the table and took his seat beside Claude.

Ben was tempted to agree with Barry but bit his tongue.

"How's Kath?" asked Barry. "I presume she's still with us."

"Oh yes." Ben replied. "She's fighting fit. You know she taught yoga for 30 years."

"Yes, it does help with the onset of old age." Barry was vague.

"I spoke to her about you. She remembered who you were."

"Probably because of the trouble with Chittananda."

"I didn't tell her about the gay business. I didn't want to upset her."

“Of course.” Barry was gracious.

“You realize that you are the first gay guru.”

Barry laughed. “The first openly gay guru.”

They all laughed in turn.

“I’ve heard stories but no one is admitting anything” Ben ventured.

“No. Homosexuality is severely repressed in India. No one would admit to it.”

“You’ve heard about the gay maharajah?” Ben queried.

“I have. His family have disowned him but he’s standing firm. He says he’s the next in line and they can’t do anything to stop him inheriting the title.” Barry was well informed.

They adjourned for lunch.

The light vegetarian meal reminded Ben of days at Chittananda’s yoga school. After cooling Jasmine tea they returned to the lower level lounge room.

During the course of conversation it came up that one of Julian’s workmates was trying to give up smoking but kept failing.

“I may be able to help you there.” Barry said.

“What do you mean?” Julian was surprised.

“I have a little pamphlet that I wrote about curing addictions. I’ll see if I can find it.”

Barry stood up and left the room. A few moments later he returned with a little leaflet in his hand. He gave it to Julian.

Julian glanced at it and said, “Thanks. I’ll show it to Owen.”

“You can keep that. I have other copies.”

Ben was curious but Julian put the leaflet in his pocket.

“Do you find that people object to your homosexuality? As a yogi I mean.” Ben asked Barry.

“Students you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Not really. If they do they don’t come back. But it doesn’t seem to be a problem here in Australia.”

“And you Claude. What do you do with yourself while Barry is teaching?”

“Me? I write a little poetry and I paint – *Sumei* – Japanese ink painting.”

“Can we see some of them?”

“Of course.”

Claude went to get his paintings and soon returned with an art folio. He opened it on the low, carved table and turned over the cover.

Most of the paintings were landscapes or flowers. There was a pool of water, rock gardens, ancient trees, occasionally a monk or a fisherman, but most of the paintings were of nature.

“You’re quite a talented artist” Ben commented.

“It’s a kind of meditation” Claude revealed.

Julian liked them so much that he asked if he could buy one.

“If you like.” Claude looked pleased. “Which one?”

Julian chose a picture of a gesturing branch with a singing bird. There were Japanese characters in the corner.

“What does that say?” Julian was curious.

“It says ‘In the morning a bird sings’. It’s a *haiku*. That’s a kind of poem.”

They negotiated a price. Julian was thrilled with his acquisition. Claude put it in a small folder so that it wouldn’t be damaged.

“It will look really nice in my room.”

Ben agreed.

They collected their things in order to leave. Barry invited them to come again and he and Claude waved goodbye from the doorway.

When they arrived home Ben asked Julian if he could see the little pamphlet that Barry had given him.

“Sure.” He removed it from his pocket and handed it to Ben.

Julian then retired to his room to look at his new painting. Ben went into the lounge room.

The Curing of Addictions.

It is important to choose the right moment – the moment when you honestly want to be cured – not when you think you should, or think you have to to please someone else.

When you stop you will experience cravings. The trick is how you deal with these cravings.

The method used is the yoga technique of abstraction. When you feel the craving you stand back and observe the sensation as if it is at arm's length. Then it is not part of you but something separate. You can even enjoy the pain in a perverse kind of way.

The craving will last a few seconds only and then it will pass. If you can resist for these few seconds then you will succeed.

The craving will return later and each time it returns you use the same method of abstraction. You observe the craving and wait for it to pass.

The cravings will last about three weeks and then they will begin to diminish.

By this time you will have perfected the technique and resisting will become easier and easier until the cravings are gone altogether and you are cured.

Barry Sutton.

Kush Yoga School.

Equal Love arranged another demonstration for the week before the federal election.

When Julian and Ben emerged from the long tunnel at the State Library the scene before them was dominated by a huge mock up of the prime Minister. The gigantic puppet was to lead the march to the State Government buildings at the top of Collins Street.

Predictably a number of politicians addressed the crowd. The Labor candidate for the seat of Melbourne was jeered and heckled throughout her speech. The Greens candidate, who had promised to support gay marriage legislation, was cheered enthusiastically.

Julian was amused. Ben was alarmed. The political nature of the rally ensured that it appeared on most of the nightly news services. They had succeeded in making gay marriage an election issue.

"You know that thing Barry gave me?" Julian asked Ben.

"The thing about curing addictions?"

"Yeah. Apparently it works."

"Did Owen give up smoking?"

"Yes. He went cold turkey and used Barry's technique. He said it was relatively easy."

"I've never heard it called easy before."

"Neither have I." Julian was astonished.

"Did you keep a copy of it? It might be worth a fortune." Ben laughed.

"I didn't think of that. You might be right."

September saw another meeting of *The Progressive Net - Son of Man/Son of God*. The speaker was a middle aged theologian named Richard Hall.

Jesus, he said, used the epithet *Son of Man* when he was referring to himself as a product of the earth and humanity, that is his human body and personality.

When Jesus used the epithet *Son of God*, he was referring to that part of himself which was related to God, that is his soul or spirit.

We are all products of the world and of God, he said.

Our personalities are a product of our heredity and our experience in the world. We also have aspects of ourselves which are shaped by God : our higher nature and spiritual ideas.

We were not to think of one as good and the other as evil. Both had value in their own right.

It was when Jesus called himself *Son of God* that he got into trouble with the Pharisees. He also claimed to be able to make men and women *Children of God*.

This made the Pharisees redundant and they reacted predictably. They crucified him.

We were all *Sons and Daughters of Humanity* and *Sons and Daughters of God*. No matter what the Church told us.

"Are you cutting out the middle man?" Was the first question.

"Jesus," he replied, "said to call no one on earth your father, because God himself is your Father."

"What does *Children of God* mean?" asked an elderly woman.

“Jesus used the expression *Children of God* when he said to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. In this he meant that acting in this way would make you like God. Again he uses *Children of God* in the beatitudes when referring to peacemakers.”

A gentle looking old man asked, “I take it you are saying that we have a physical and a spiritual nature. Paul would say that we have to deny the physical in order to gain the spiritual. What is your view on this matter?”

“I am aware of the duality in Paul’s writing but Jesus never set one against the other in the way that Paul did. Jesus was matter of fact about his physical needs whereas I would describe him as aspirational in relation to spirituality.”

There were no more questions so Isabel thanked him and the meeting broke up.

Steven Reynolds’ holiday house was now completed and Ben and Julian received an invitation to the grand opening.

Julian decided that he needed a new outfit for the occasion and Ben went with him to Chapel Street.

He chose a trendy pair of dark brown trousers with pockets everywhere and an ochre and tan shirt. He would wear his black blazer over the top. He decided his blue board shorts would pass.

When the day came it was sunny but cool so Ben wore his beige trousers and a pink knit shirt with his beige jacket. He took a jumper in case he was cold.

As they arrived there were cars parked everywhere in the front yard. The sweeping façade of the house impressed Julian who had never seen the plans.

Steven greeted them at the door and showed them through the open entranceway into the pear shaped lounge room which overlooked the pool and garden. The view of the sea beyond was spectacular.

There were several young men swimming in the heated pool and Ben suddenly realized that there were no women present. Julian grinned like a cat.

They were to stay overnight so Steven showed them into one of the many bedrooms where they deposited their bags.

When they returned to the lounge room they went up to the bar and served themselves. Julian had a rum and coke and Ben settled for a mineral water.

“Aren’t you going to have a drink?” prompted Julian.

“Perhaps later” Ben reluctantly replied.

Ben recognized several men from Steven’s fashion house. Stanley Baker, the manager, was in deep conversation with a handsome young man whom Ben presumed was one of Steven’s models. Peter Couples, one of the junior designers, was talking with Malcolm Davidson, Steven’s accountant, and a strong looking man in his forties whom Ben did not know. Albert Rimmer from the cutting department was amusing himself with a group of young men by the window.

Men were arriving all the time. A famous gay rock star appeared with his partner and several young footballers were discretely ushered in. Julian raised his eyebrows at Ben but said nothing.

Ben and Julian split up and Ben went over to talk to Peter and Malcolm.

“Quite a gathering” Ben ventured.

“Yes” replied Malcolm. “This is Bruce Goldthorpe.” He indicated the strong man. “You know Peter of course.”

“Yes. How do you do Bruce.”

“This is Ben Taylor the designer of this architectural masterpiece.”

“Really” Bruce responded. “I’m impressed.”

Ben blushed a little and said, “Thank you.”

“We’re all impressed Ben” Peter put in.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Ben beamed. “And what do you do Bruce?”

“I work in the media. Production.”

“Good. Drama or current affairs?”

“Drama mostly but there’s not a lot around these days so I double in reality T.V..”

“Oh!” Ben hesitated. “So it’s you who is tantalizing us day and night.”

“That’s right.”

They all laughed. Ben glanced over at Julian who was talking to the young models. Steven was introducing the footballers to some young men who Ben didn’t recognize.

“Is Anton here?” Ben asked Malcolm. Anton was Malcolm’s partner.

“Oh yes. He’s in the pool I think.”

They all looked around and Ben spotted him sitting on the edge of the pool. He waved and they all waved back.

“And you Peter, are you with anyone?”

“Not at the moment. But there’s plenty to choose from.”

“Quite.”

“I hear Julian’s working” Malcolm prompted.

“Yes. He’s involved with *The Anti-Violence Group*. He’ll be thrilled with the young footballers. They put in quite a bit of work there.”

“I saw it on T.V..” Peter was excited.

“It’s almost impossible to get AFL players to come out.” Bruce complained. “We’ve had a couple of them on reality shows but they won’t admit anything.”

“I presume we’re all sworn to secrecy tonight.” Ben chuckled.

“I presume so.” agreed Malcolm.

At about 6:00pm dinner was served. Pizza and salad with ice cream for dessert. All of the swimmers came inside to get something to eat. A few took food outside and sat on the wrought iron garden chairs by the pool.

Ben caught up with Julian and asked him if he was enjoying himself.

“Of course.” He said. “I’m yet to get together with those footballers . I’m dying to ask them about homophobia in the locker room.”

“Don’t push your luck Julian.” Ben warned. “They haven’t come out you know. But I’m sure you’ll be discreet.”

Julian touched his nose as if to say mum’s the word.

During the course of the evening Ben spoke to Stanley and Albert about their business and joked with the young models. Ben recognized David, who had accompanied Steven to Ben’s garden party. He was very taken with the famous pop star and spent much of the night with his entourage.

As the evening began to wane some of the men retired to the bedrooms. Julian looked tempted but Ben was past promiscuous sport. He went to their bedroom and tried to sleep. It was some time before Julian crept into the darkened room and slipped into the bed beside him. Ben didn’t want to question him so he pretended to be asleep. It was not long before they were both sound asleep.

In the morning everyone seemed to sleep in after the late night and it was nearly 10:00am before they ventured out for breakfast. Most of the revelers had left during the night so there were just the overnight guests.

“How did you enjoy my little party?” Steven teased.

“Very well.” Ben replied.

“And you Julian? You seemed to be well occupied.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Ben was always surprised at how polite Julian was; he almost sounded shy, which he was not. No comment was made about the closeted celebrities; Ben would ask Julian later if he had spoken to any of them.

After finishing their breakfast and collecting their gear Ben and Julian said their farewells and headed home.

Julian seemed very pleased with himself as Ben drove them up the highway.

“Did you catch up with any of those footballers?” Ben was blunt.

“I’m not at liberty to say.” Julian grinned.

“I see. Can’t you even tell me?”

“Certainly not. My lips are sealed.”

Ben was disappointed that Julian had not confided in him but he put it aside and concentrated on his architectural triumph.

Ben visited his brother Robert at his home.

After apologizing for not coming as often as he should because Robert was so much better, Ben asked him how he was.

“I’m fine.” Robert answered. “I haven’t had any major relapses since I swore off the rock music.”

“That’s good. You realize that you haven’t rung me for help since we changed the music over.”

“That’s right. I hadn’t realized.”

“Have you got any new C.D.s?”

“I bought a few. It’s trial and error really. I’ve decided I like Chopin. I got a couple of C.D.s of his. It’s mostly piano. But the sacred music is best. I got a C.D. of Russian choral music and Hildegard of Bingen.”

“Hildegard of Bingen! That’s pretty esoteric.”

“It’s simple music like chanting.”

“They call it plainchant because there are no harmonies. It’s all in unison.”

“I see.”

“Is anything else happening?”

“It’s funny you should ask because I found something that perfectly describes the collective unconscious.”

“What is it?” Ben was intrigued.

“It’s a Buddhist text from the 3rd century called *Indra’s Jewelled Net*. I’ll get it.”

Robert left the room and returned with a sheet of paper.

“It’s from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.” He handed the sheet to Ben.

Ben read through the text which described a marvelous net set with jewels at each node. The net was infinite and the jewels reflected each other infinitely.

“Where did you find this?” Ben was astonished.

“I was surfing the Net at the library. I saw the name and I just thought it might be interesting.”

“I’ve never heard it before. You say it describes the unconscious.”

“Yes. The voices are the others in the Net and the reflections are their perceptions of you and of each other. It describes it perfectly.”

“Amazing!”

“Some Buddhist sects say that Vairocana Buddha, that is the supreme Buddha of creation, or God, is at the center of the Net.”

“It’s fascinating.”

“It helps to understand schizophrenia – the voices and the perceptions create the hallucinations. It makes sense.”

“You said that the demonic voices were trying to trick you all the time. I believe Jung calls it *The Trickster* and claims that it is an archetype of some sort.” Ben recalled.

“That’s just the Satanists in the Net. They constantly try to get you into trouble with the others. They work on unconscious fears and negative perceptions – like prejudice and racism – in much the same way as Hitler did.”

“Hitler’s one of their heroes I believe.”

“That would make sense. Once you can identify them and name them then you can manage them.”

“It sounds very similar to ancient Egyptian ideas about the underworld. If you could name the demons or entities in the underworld you had power over them.”

“Exactly.”

“Well I’m glad you have found this out Robert.”

“It makes a lot of difference.”

“I imagine it does.” Ben could hardly believe what had happened. He had prayed for Robert regularly over many years but had never expected something like this.

After coffee Ben wished Robert all the best and prepared to leave. “I’ll pray for your continued recovery.”

“Thanks.”

The new confidence in Robert’s voice impressed Ben immensely. He left feeling elated.

Philip Newberry rang Ben with surprising news. Someone had contacted Philip through his web site and wanted to make peace with God before he died of lung cancer. Chris Maloney had sold his soul to the Devil when he was seventeen. He and his band had followed Satan ever since. He was now fifty-seven.

Philip had spoken to Vivian and he had agreed to see him. There was little point, he said, in sending them to the Fundamentalists or the Catholics.

“No. They’d only make him twice the son of Hell.” Ben paraphrased.

Philip wanted Ben to be there for moral support.

Later Ben had an idea and he rang Vivian who agreed to go along with what Ben was proposing. He also rang Philip back to discuss it with him before their meeting.

The day of the meeting came and Ben met Philip outside St. James’. They waited there for Chris to arrive. After a few minutes a car pulled up and a man got out. He was dressed all in black and was fidgeting nervously. He looked as if he hadn’t shaved for a week.

After brief introductions they all went inside and met Vivian in the community room.

“I understand,” Vivian began, “that you sold your soul to the Devil when you were quite young.”

“Yes” mumbled Chris.

“And you want to know if you can be reconciled to God.”

“Exactly.” Chris looked as if he might flee at any moment.

“Ben has something he wants to say to you.”

“What you have to realize Chris is that there is no being called Satan.”

“What?”

“The Devil is a purely intellectual conception. He does not exist in reality.”

“You mean I’ve been serving a non-existent entity for forty years?”

“Yes.” Ben paused. “But what you have done remains.”

“What I have done. To fans you mean.”

“Yes.”

Chris looked at Vivian in astonishment.

“That’s right Chris. Most modern Christians don’t believe in Satan as a living being.”

Chris looked to Philip who nodded agreement. “So where does that leave me?” Chris was smiling.

“We at St. James do not believe in a place called Hell either.” Vivian spoke with great gentleness.

“So I’m not going to Hell.”

“No.” Vivian was emphatic. “We believe in a compassionate God who does not punish men and women.”

“I believe,” Ben put in, “that you have been given bad advice.”

“A bum steer if you like” added Philip.

“You mean God’s not a vicious bastard after all?”

“Not at all Chris.” Vivian let this sink in. “But you have harmed people none the less.” He paused again briefly. “Do you want to ask forgiveness for that?”

Chris was silent. After a moment he said, “Yes I do.”

“Will you pray with us?”

“Yes please.”

“Good.” Vivian composed himself. “Father God we pray on behalf of your son Chris Maloney who has been led astray by false ideas. He wishes to be forgiven for any harm that he has caused by his mistaken behavior. This includes harm to fans and followers of his rock band and to anyone who has listened to their music.

“He also wishes to be forgiven for any offence that he has caused to you, God of All, and sincerely wishes to be reconciled with you before his death. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

“Amen” Ben and Philip echoed.

“Amen.” Chris opened his eyes and immediately looked relieved.

“Do you wish to reinforce your decision by attending Church here at St. James’?” Vivian was calm.

“Can I?”

“Of course. Sundays at 10:00am.” Vivian smiled. “I suggest that you pray tonight and each day for the next few days. God will listen.”

“Thank you.” He sounded sincere. “Can you write down that prayer for me so I don’t forget what to say?”

“I’ll put it in the first person for you.” Vivian took a pen and paper and wrote down the prayer. He passed the paper to Chris. “Is there anything else?”

“Not at the moment. But there may be later on.....” He trailed off vaguely.

“I understand.” Vivian could see that there were some things that Chris had done that would not be easily forgiven. “Read that prayer and sincerely ask for forgiveness.”

With that the meeting ended and Ben and Philip escorted their new friend out to his car. He was smiling and had tears in his eyes. Philip patted him on the back and Ben shook him by the hand. Then he was gone.

“First over!” Philip was delighted.

“First over” Ben agreed.

That Sunday Ben was joined at St James’ by Philip and they were rapt when Chris appeared just before 10:00am.

Vivian began the service with an introduction to the story of the prodigal son. He had placed a reproduction of Rembrandt’s painting beside the altar and the image of the child kneeling before his father, whose hands are embracing his son’s shoulders, was a powerful influence throughout the service.

The sermon was short and to the point. God was not a punisher of humankind he was a loving father who longed to be reconciled with his children. The delighted father running to meet his son on the road. “.....your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.”(GNB)

Constance had arranged a meal after the service and they all stayed to take their places.

Philip was as happy as Ben had seen him. He talked with Chris and introduced him as a musician friend.

After Chris had left, Philip took Ben aside and spoke enthusiastically about his project. “If we can get enough information out there then we can call a kind of amnesty. It would be like South Africa – Nelson Mandela’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”

Ben could see what Philip was proposing. Who was he to say that God would not do it? He had seen the look of unfeigned joy on Chris’s face.

The Father Judges No Man was the title of the last *Progressive Net* meeting for the year. Colin Pierce, one of the three wise men from St. Aiden’s, was to give the address.

He began by saying that although this quotation from John was followed by the statement “He has given his son the full right to judge”(GNB) that the latter was out of character with Jesus other sayings and more like the sophisticated Christology found elsewhere in the *Gospel of John*.

Life experience, he said, was so far from divine judgment that we have over the centuries been forced to put ourselves through all manner of theological contortions in order to make this concept fit.

The Book of Job was an early example of this.

In the Psalms David was always asking God to destroy his enemies but it never happened.

The passages about the Day of Judgment in the Gospels said that men who were alive at the time of Jesus would see the Day in their lifetime.

The letters of Paul and Peter in particular addressed the issue and their attempts to reinforce the idea that God is our judge - if not now, then later; if not during life, then after death - were elaborate.

They are still saying this today despite the millennium at 1000AD and the millennium at 2000AD and countless times before, between, and after.

Perhaps, he said, we would be excused for beginning to think that this Day of Judgment will never happen. And if that is so then perhaps God does not judge us at all.

There was Biblical justification for this view.

Jesus said God “makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil.”(GNB) This is followed by the statement that God is all good.

When the woman caught in adultery is set before Jesus and the Pharisees tempt him to judge her he draws in the sand and will not be moved. He says,“Whichever one of you has

committed no sin may throw the first stone at her.”(GNB) Then, when all her accusers are gone, he says to her “I do not condemn you either.”(GNB)

“Your sins are forgiven”(GNB) is Jesus constant refrain.

So the time has come for us to re-vision this view. No longer should we see God as an unfeeling judge of everything we do on earth but as a loving father who forgives us yet one more time until we are free.

The audience was happy with Colin’s approach and there were not many questions.

Ben went home feeling justified. It was as he had always intuitively felt – God was not our judge but the benevolent father of all humankind.

There was one last Gay Marriage Demonstration for the year. It was held the week before the Victorian State Election and political speakers once again dominated the speeches.

This time, however, the Labor candidate had backed gay marriage rights and other measures that would benefit the gay community and the crowd was less hostile. Red printed signs supporting her were everywhere in the crowd.

She consequently held her seat at the election but the Labor Government was thrown out of office by the Coalition and any goodwill she may have been able to foster was lost.

Organizers of the demonstrations vowed to continue the fight.

On a cloudy afternoon in early December Ben received a phone call from Isabel Bennett. She asked if she could come over and speak to him privately about something which had just come up.

Ben agreed and she came over straight away.

Isabel was excited and happy as Ben showed her into the study. After declining a drink she launched into her purpose.

“I suppose you’re wondering what this is all about.”

“I was, yes.”

“Well an elderly woman, who wishes to remain anonymous, has died and bequeathed a considerable amount of money to *The Progressive Net*.” Isabel smiled. “And she has stipulated that a substantial portion of it be used to build a church in which Progressive Christians can worship.”

“How much is it for goodness sake?”

“Suffice to say that it’s enough. We thought long and hard about the wisdom of doing this and we have decided to accept the conditions.” Isabel paused dramatically. “And we want you to design the new church.”

Ben was taken aback by this sudden request. He had never designed a church before. “I will do it of course.” He blurted out. “I’m just adjusting to this news.”

“You think *you’re* surprised!” Isabel was silent for a moment to allow the idea to sink in.

“What size would it be?” Ben was musing.

“*The Progressive Net* here in Melbourne has about 350 members at this stage and it’s growing so to seat about 500.”

“500. That’s a considerable building.”

“Yes but it would be the only Progressive Christian church in Australia, or the world for that matter.” Isabel stood up. “I won’t keep you at this stage. I just wanted to tell you the news.”

“Of course.”

Ben let Isabel out.

His mind was racing. He tried to settle down but he couldn’t keep still.

He decided to go for a walk to calm his mind.

As he walked down the busy street Ben noticed an old church that was being demolished. The formerly sacred site was now strewn with rubble – concrete blocks, bricks, broken beams, smashed tiles – and in the middle of this, where the garden had been, grew a single pink rose – the flower of love.

Ben realized that after the demolition of the towering doctrines of orthodox religion what was left was not nothing. What remained was unconditional love – the true religion.

He stood still, mesmerized for a moment by the perfect, shining bloom, and something touched his heart. Love stirred within him and he knew that the real temple of God was the heart. The mind might be open and full of truth, even enlightened, but the center was in the heart.

It was as if when all the bastions and battlements of thought and perception were stripped away you reached the heart and there found love.

He smiled and continued on his way.

He began to think about the new church.....

Scriptures (marked GNB) are taken from the *Good News Bible* published by The Bible Society/Collins © American Bible Society.

