

# Poems from the Back Pew

*Chris Price*



## Foreword

*The twenty-four poems that make up this collection were written at various times from the early 1970s to 1998, the year that St Faith's Church, Great Crosby, launched its Centenary Celebrations.*

*They have in common one obvious connection, in that they are nearly all written from the standpoint of one who has occupied the 'Back5ew, traditional resting place of a Church Warden, throughout most of that period. As such they present a perspective on the life and worship of my Church through a quarter of a century. I have attempted to group them loosely in smaller units: poems specifically designed to commemorate, to raise money and to entertain; poems reflecting various issuings forth from St Faith's to places of pilgrimage and visitation near and far; poems portraying the church at worship throughout the liturgical year; and finally poems in dedication. A few fall outside even these broad headings: but life is never that tidy.*

*Most of these verses first saw print in Newslink, St Faith's magazine, which I edit, and can thus use as my uncritical publisher. Some have been more widely circulated in my published anthology Reflections, while some appear in public for the first time. Together, they are offered to mark the centenary of the building of St Faith's, and as a thankoffering to the Church which has sheltered and sustained me for some forty years. I acknowledge with gratitude the use of some of Eric Salisbury's evocative drawings, and the facilities offered by the Image Press at Merchant Taylors' School.*

*Chris Price  
May, 1998*

*Centenary of Foundation of St Faith's*

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*The first poem is a sonnet: a 14-line poem to a prescribed pattern of rhyme and rhythm. It is a potted history of the Church, what it stands for, and what we hope we are doing today. 'Never Again' is less obviously serious, and is a tongue-in-cheek. complaint by an imaginary visitor. It was written soon after we had to fence off the porches, but also tries to express something of the problems Saint Faith's has faced down the ages from those unfamiliar with its churchmanship.*

*'The 'Ode for Saint Faith's ' started life as a longer version of the Church's history, written to support the 1987 organ appeal. 'The poem which follows it is a take -off of the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and was inspired by an earlier vicar's attempts to persuade people that they should give 10% of their income to the church. Finally in this group 'Talking Talents` commemorates the launch of the first St Faith's Talents Scheme in 1994. It was a success, and the current scheme, now running, has raised well over double the amount quoted in the poem!*

## **Sonnet for the Centenary**

**They built in trust before the houses came —  
Foursquare uncompromising brick and stone  
And gave their church a fearful martyr's name  
To mark its witness where it stood alone.**

**Thus Douglas Horsfall's bounty came to be,  
Founded in faith, sailing against the tide —  
People and priests one in adversity  
With prayer arid sacrament their daily guide.**

**So through a century this temple grew:  
Succeeding generations gave their best  
To pass this blessing to the steadfast few  
Who loved this place and found in Faith their rest.**

**Ours is that trust: to guard in latter days,  
For all who come, a house of prayer and praise.**

*March, 1998*

# Never Again

I'll not be going there again - no thank you, not for me,  
I tried St Faith's last Sunday and it's not my cup of tea.  
It's not the sort of church that folk stroll into off the street  
To park their parcels on the pew and rest their weary feet.

There's gates around the porch - our kids can't get in any more  
To spray things on the notice-boards or scrawl things on the door.  
And if you come on Sundays, you'll find it very odd  
You'd sometimes think the people there really believe in God.

There's vicars dressed in fancy robes all swinging holy smoke;  
It's enough to scare the daylights out of simple honest folk.  
They say that they are C of E, but that's a load of dope:  
I'm sure the other day I heard them praying for the Pope.

And if you peer in for a look there's nowhere you can hide -  
They pull you in and sit you down before you're half inside,  
To face an hour of songs and chants and bobbing up and down -  
If I want to see a pantomime I'll take the train to town!

And if at last you settle down you won't find much release -  
They'll drag you up and shake your hand and call it sharing Peace.  
Then when the plate comes round they talk of tithing for the Lord;  
Well don't they know that 20p's the most I can afford?

And when at last they're finished they come waltzing down the aisle  
With cross and candles, singing hymns and putting on the style.  
You can't get out for rows of priests, they're a weird lot and all -  
They take your name and make you drink cold coffee in the Hall.

I want a comfortable church, an easy home from home,  
Not a place of smells and bells that's on the road to Rome.  
I've had enough - it's definitely time that I got weaving;  
Much more of this and there's a risk I might end up believing!

*May, 1991*

# Ode for Saint Faith's

Carved out from older parishes around,  
Who yielded it their dedicated ground,  
See Douglas Horsfall's firm-set building stand  
Square on its patch of consecrated land.  
Buttressed in brick, high-roofed, a ship at rest,  
Anchored by faith, still steering to the west;  
No lofty spire to point it to the sky,  
But still a monument to passers-by.  
To some a resting-place en route to Rome,  
To most a bus-stop, and for us a home.

Built as a century drew to its close;  
Built in thanksgiving and in hope by those  
Who sought to witness to a church restored  
To living witness of a living Lord.  
Built when an aging Queen still held her throne,  
(Her name indelibly carved in its stone)  
For Anglo-Catholics to uphold the cause,  
Though irate Protestants besiege its doors.

Now history unfolds, the years roll on -  
Clergy and people past have come and gone.  
Ritual is shaped, tradition is laid down,  
Though Rome be puzzled and Low Churchmen frown.  
Let sober Mattins call from churches round:  
Within these walls hear more exotic sound.  
Lo, Popish Practices at every turn:  
Vestments are worn, candles and incense burn.

A Christian family grows up in prayer;  
Built round the sacraments, with love and care.  
Time still moves on: beneath confirming hands  
A future Primate of All England stands.  
A church embattled lives through two World Wars,  
And still the faithful pass between its doors  
To watch, from stronghold safe, the world without  
Wrapped in indifference, mistrust and doubt;  
Until the tide of faith begins to turn,  
And ecumenical's the word to learn.

With liturgy reshaped and worship shared,  
Slowly the wounds are healed, the breach repaired.  
Altars are moved, pews lifted and replaced,  
With trendy services for every taste,  
To Family Worship now St Faith's bell calls,  
And Series Three is heard within these walls,  
Until the 'Eighties dawn and lo! we see  
The Revelation of the A.S.B.

Through years of worship and unceasing praise  
The voice of Music has been strong to raise  
In choir and chancel sweetly singing round  
Its well-tuned harmony and goodly sound.  
Successive organists, enthroned on high,  
Have set the echoes ringing to the sky;  
While white-robed cherubs chanting in the stalls  
Antiphonally echoed from these walls.  
And now, in quality and numbers grown,  
The choir's achievements are more widely known,  
Till, called to service by the BBC,  
They find themselves on radio and TV.

Yet see! Dark clouds on the horizon loom:  
Organic Experts speak in voice of doom.  
Through pipes and bellows hear the message steal:  
We need a costly Organ Fund Appeal'  
The need is urgent, and the problem grave,  
Lest pipes and all come crashing down the nave.  
Repair! Electrify! Resite! Restore!  
Raise money! Scrape the barrel! Now give more!  
The funds roll in, yet much remains to do:  
The organ's future rests, dear friends, with you.  
Shall leather perish, outworn linkage fail?  
Instead of harmony, discord prevail?  
Must music's cause be pleaded here in vain,  
Or shall our Instrument rise up again?

No Betjeman frames this appeal in verse:  
A humble Warden bids you ope your purse.  
Let not the ravages of Time decay;  
Help save our noble organ while we may;  
That God's great Music may sound out above,  
To lead our worship in the Church we love.

*April 1987*

# The Rime of The Ancient Minister

*(With apologies to Samuel Taylor Coleridge)*

**It is the hopeful Parish Priest;  
He preacheth one in ten:  
'Oh, who will raise the sum he gives,  
Then raise it yet again?'**

**He casts his baleful eye around -  
Men tremble in their pews,  
As from on high the message comes  
With dire financial news.**

**'God giveth all, both great and small,  
Rich blessings from above.  
Dig deep into your purse and give  
Some token of that love.'**

**'Our church bazaars can fill a gap,  
And leave this roof intact,  
But plugging holes won't reach our goals,'  
He saith. 'And that's a fact!'**

**'Make every feast a sacrifice!  
Make every season Lent!  
Break open every piggy bank,  
And aim for ten per cent!'**

**A gloomy leaflet backs him up:  
We read it as we leave  
And, like the rich man in God's word,  
We go, and, richly, grieve.**

**'Men love the best who give the most,  
In this world and the next.  
So give and give until it hurts' –  
Thus reads that painful text.**

**'Money, money, every week:  
From giving do not shrink.  
Money, money on the plate,  
Nor any drop on drink!'**

**Avoiding other's eyes we leave:  
Out of the church we steal,  
And still our conscience as we eat  
Our ample Sunday meal**

# Talking Talents

The Council in its wisdom was formulating ways  
Whereby the church might keep afloat in dark financial days.  
Four thousand pounds at least we need to keep us up to par:  
In dread we faced the prospect of another church bazaar.  
Then, lo! one spake and suddenly a cunning scheme suggested  
Wherein the skills of one and all might safely be invested.  
And thus was born and brought to life a great and mighty plan:  
That very day 'twas voted in - the Talents Scheme began.  
Now folks are making marmalade, and others making wills,  
Or printing things, or mending things, and ringing up the tills  
With washing cars and knitting toys and offering B and B,  
Or typing things or walking pets or having folks to tea.  
Each took five pounds and pledged that it would not inactive lie,  
But grow, expand, increase, add up, go forth and multiply.  
So some clean brass and some make cakes and others teddy bears,  
Sing operagrams, plan busking shows or make and sell their wares  
At Talents Mini-Markets, where goods are on display  
For the rest of us to do our bit by buying what we may.  
For all can help and all *must* help in this our hour of need,  
That we may reach our target and the Talents Scheme succeed.  
So forward one, and forward all, support all those who strive  
By giving skills and services to keep St Faith's alive.  
The Church Commissioners' mistakes have left things in the balance;  
We'll tip the scales and square our books by cashing in our Talents!

*June 1994*

*The 'Celebration' of the next poem was a week, of activities in 1991 built round a visit by Archbishop Runcie, our most celebrated 'Old Boy', to our Patronal Festival, in the setting of a flower festival and a series of events, displays and exhibitions, the forerunner of a more extended programme of happenings between 1998 and the fateful year 2000. Less exalted by far, the 'Psalm or Saint Faith's' is a somewhat scurrilous 'poem' featuring various earlier dignitaries of the Church. It has, needless to say, no relevance whatsoever to anyone serving the Church today.*

*The 'Mirfield Commemoration' was a 1982 Church visit to the Yorkshire home of the Community of the Resurrection, where once again Lord Runcie (Robert Cantuar) was preaching, and a good time was had by all. 'Foxhill' was the setting for a rather different visit: a silent parish retreat in Cheshire, where those who went could escape for a while into pastoral beauty.*

# Celebration

Before the memories fade with the flowers,  
Set this down:  
That this was indeed a celebration -  
A coming together of parish and people  
To offer their time, their talents and the work of their hands  
In a high festival of pageantry and of praise.

Here there was music:  
Children's voices lifted in bright harmonies;  
Choirs weaving their intricate tapestries of sound.

Here there was great beauty in display:  
Sculpture in uplifted frozen flight;  
The word emblazoned on banner and in print.  
And everywhere a glory of fragrant flowers,  
Glowing from nave, from chancel and from sanctuary,  
Lovingly arranged and attended with prayer.

In this place there was fellowship:  
A happy sharing of this abundance of beauty.  
This was a place to cherish and in which to linger  
For the renewing of friendship and for the deepening of belief:  
For the reunion of the faithful from afar and from high places.

And this was a temple of high and solemn praise,  
A triumphant place of rest in pilgrimage,  
With worship that uplifted and yet humbled;  
Thanksgiving, dedication and a great and holy joy.

For all who made this possible we give thanks.  
And this much can never fade: this loveliness will endure.  
For all these things we rejoice in our God today and always.

*October 1991*

*June 1994*

# A Psalm for Saint Faith's

I was glad when they said / unto me:  
we will / go into the / house of Saint / Faith.

For in our church in- / deed are / seen:  
all / manner of / wonderful / things.

In that place you / may be- / hold:  
our unique and wonderful vicar, / Father / Richard:

There is none like him, nay, in all the / Bootle / Deanery:  
especially when it / cometh / to his / singing.

For when he lifteth up his voice in the / holy / place:  
verily it frighteneth the / pigeons / from the / rafters:

And it causeth brave men to / run in / fear  
even unto the / farthest / end of the / parish.

Yet is our Vicar's voice as sweet as the honey and charmeth the / birds from the /  
trees:  
when it is set against the sound that cometh from the / throat of /  
Father Dennis:

For when he breaketh into song / in the / sanctuary:  
men cover their ears and take shelter, even as far as Formby and unto  
the / uttermost / corners of / Southport.

And there is none like him for making a joyful and / mighty / noise:  
usually half a / line behind / everybody / else.

And lo, when he maketh the sign of the cross / in the / sanctuary:  
choirboys hide under their seats and even the / organist / feeleth  
the! draught.

Which brings us to the subject / of the *I* organist:  
about whom perhaps the less / said, or / chanted, the / better.

**For what can be said of a man whose *I* only / complaint:  
concerneth the / inadequate *I* size of his *I* organ?**

**But behold when we come to look upon the / choir:  
it can truly be said that the age of *I* miracles / is not / past.**

**For each week their number increaseth, of every size, / shape and / colour:  
and either they are only there for the pay, or the Lord is doing  
marvellous things and the back *I* row are  
breeding like / rabbits.**

**And there is a more wonderful thing yet / to be seen:  
when we behold the / servers / at the *I* altar.**

**For there is a great confusion *I* of the *I* sexes:  
for they have brought in girls to do a man's job, and dressed up all the /  
boys in / frilly / skirts.**

**And now behold / in the / pulpit:  
six / feet above *I* contradiction.**

**The clergy have switched off the *I* church / heating:  
and still manage to pro- / vide us with / endless hot *I* air.**

**And after all this it *I* is no / wonder:  
that the Congregation seemeth not to know if it is!  
coming or *I* going.**

**For half of them genuflect be- / fore the *I* altar:  
and the rest before the picture of Arch- / bishop / Robert Runcie.**

**Glory be to the Vicar, and / to the / Curates:  
and to the / whole / congregation.**

**As it was in the beginning, is now, and / ever / shall be:  
always provided that the dry rot doesn't / spread / into the church.**

# Mirfield Commemoration

The faithful flock to Mirfield in the sun,  
Thronging the grounds and squashed in the marquee;  
The tented ceremonials have begun  
And everything's as High as it can be.

See now the Solemn Eucharist begin  
With incense swinging gaily to the clouds:  
Concelebrants, monastics process in  
While Robert Cantuar enthral the crowds.

Now charismatic chorus fills the air,  
As thousands flock to take their bread and wine,  
Shuffling up, marshalled with love and care  
To queue in rev'rent Mass-production line.

Outside, a panoply of picnics spread  
As hunger after righteousness takes hold  
And Church of England appetites are fed  
As Church of England anecdotes are told.

No dog-dirt or transistor babble here:  
Just happy voices drifting on the breeze;  
And see the Punch and Judy man appear,  
Belabouring the baby 'neath the trees.

And this is not the croquet crowd you see  
- Cathedral close inhabitants at play -  
They're folk from parishes like you and me,  
Just common Anglicans out for the day.

All so wonderfully polite and keen:  
We queue for tea, for evensong, for loos,  
Watch Morris Dancers prancing on the green,  
And share the latest scandal from the pews.

**Until at last the plainsong echoes sound  
And crocodiles of coaches sidle up,  
Gath'ring away supporters from the ground -  
Those fulfilled followers of a better Cup.**

**Beyond the gates the cruel world invades:  
Bad-tempered motorists still fume and curse;  
The blissful Anglican experience fades  
And weekday living goes from bad to worse.**

**if only every day could be like this!  
Lord, give us grace to shape ourselves anew:  
Regain lost innocence and fallen bliss:  
And make our lives a garden party too.**

*1982/1996*

# Silent Retreat: Foxhill

Here swallows in ceaseless swift parabolas  
Skim low to intercept insects on the wing.  
Blue-white and orange, a jay in flashing flight  
Dips and swerves below the big house.  
Wood-pigeons call in soothing throaty monotony,  
Or crash, startled, through the windy woodland.  
Sun-shadows sweep across the sloping meadow;  
Sparrows flit from the sanctuary of the great trees:  
Deep stillness harmonised by the wind's sighing  
And the soft singing of unnumbered birds.  
The eye ranges unhindered over the stately sweep  
Of tall-banked woodland rising to the high horizon,  
While a great glory of red and purple rhododendron  
Hangs rich and heavy in the bright air.

After the first chatter and the greeting of friends  
There is quietness within. The ritual of silent meals:  
Gesture and misunderstanding; the happy communion  
Of cornflakes and the friendly fellowship  
Of the fried egg. The extra slice of toast taken  
Rather than refuse the eloquent mute offering.  
Biting to a background of Beethoven and Bach,  
While outside the royal river of rhododendron  
Flows down from the green heights to spill  
Over the immaculate smooth strand of the croquet lawn.

Filled full, the solemn file shuffles politely to the tea trolley  
Then retreats for food for thought in the circled chapel:  
Measured wisdom in the morning and in the evening  
For docile disciples, willing devotees of the Word.  
The quiet comfort of familiar worship,  
Early and late, frames the day with God:  
The release of praise and song, a profound fellowship  
Found and renewed in the peace of the Lord.

And through the chapel window always seen  
The swaying panorama of the tall trees  
With songbirds bright against the soft air of summer;  
The rustic drone of a mower and the sweet  
Country scent of the newly-mown grass:  
The effortless perfection of the harmony of God  
Glimpsed in the delicate white arabesques  
Of butterflies, intricate and absorbed  
Against the feathered fingers of a green larch.

High in the moving woods, beside the curve  
Of shrub-lined walks and walls of mellow stone,  
A squirrel, taken unaware, scurries to safety,  
Scaling the friendly fastness of an oak.  
From the far crest the eye swings round  
To see a pictured parable laid out below:  
Through miles of pastoral sweetness  
To the long glint of the Mersey's estuary,  
The remote dim bulk of the great cathedral tower  
And, bright and smoke-belching on the distant air,  
The fungus growth of chemical plant,  
With chimney, cooling-tower and convoluted tangle  
Of steel-skeined pipework to assault the eye.  
It beckons uncompromisingly back down the hill  
To the dull air of Liverpool and the end of retreat:  
To another life and a new week.

Back to God's world and ours.

*June 11th, 1978*

*'The 'Cathedral' of the next poem is, of course, the great Anglican one in Liverpool. I hold it in much more respect and affection than the poem might suggest: it is at its best on great occasions (and St Faith's Choir perform there annually!) 'Perspectives' is one such great occasion: an ordination of priests and deacons, including one to serve at St Faith 's, and it is a flight of fancy.*

*Staying in Liverpool and departing temporarily from the theme of St Faith 's and the Anglican Church, 'Liverpool Morning' seems to demand inclusion for its poignancy of subject, and perhaps to reflect the fact that it seemed to those of us who were there to be in all but name a religious ritual.*

*Finally in this group, the 'Sonnet' is an earlier attempt at the sonnet form, which demands (even if does not always get) a coherent theme and a disciplined treatment.*

# Cathedral

Always rising above the river and the flat coastal plains,  
It crouches massively on the Liverpool skyline,  
Riding above a townscape of still unfilled bomb sites  
Where black bin-bags clog the back alleys  
And spray paint scrawls drab walls and boarded, gaping windows.  
Wherever you are, there is no escaping it:  
An uncompromising gothic statement,  
Soaring ramparts of towering sandstone,  
Slab piled on slab, solid and unrelieved.  
Embattled fortress, a proclamation of unfashionable power,  
Reared from its foundations in an age of faith,  
Built with merchants' money, the tithings of an Empire's grubby trade,  
Unfolding down the years bay by echoing bay,  
Craning up laboriously over a century of slow growth,  
It rests now, dwarfing the glass and concrete capsule  
Of its mushroomed Metropolitan neighbour  
Perching at the other end of a street called Hope.

Inside, the sheer scale subdues you, challenging belief;  
In this reverberating emptiness what detail there is lost.  
There are vast vistas here, but no secrets —  
A cavernous, uncluttered presence, but without mystery;  
A museum of masonry erected out of its time, yet without a history.  
Its aisles, tall tunnelled corridors tiled with stone,  
Shelter few effigies and prompt fewer prayers;  
No saints throng its shadows: there are no echoes from the consecrated past.  
In this monumental and hollow height  
Even the choir's trained voices shiver into high thin echoes;  
Disembodied amplified prayers boom and scatter through space.  
Only the organ's mighty thunderings  
Can shake the founding stone beneath your feet,  
Shatter the vacuumed acreage of chill and empty air  
And for a time fill up this tall, cold, vaulted temple  
With a triumphant certainty of splendid sound.

Outside, beyond the bright, incongruous new glass,  
Even this trumpeting apocalypse of power  
Is lost in the indifferent city's roar.  
Beyond the terraced walls, the patrolled and guarded gates,  
The scarred streets still await their resurrection.

*May, 1991*

# Perspectives

On the floor of this consecrated and cavernous cathedral space  
An intricate pattern of worship is laid down.  
At eye-level, one of a thousand witnesses,  
I peer past hats and hairdos to perceive  
A two-dimensional and partial perspective.  
Bishops and deacons and servants of the sanctuary  
Progress ponderously into and past the eye's immediate focus  
To squat on distant squares of this vast chess-board.  
In due course, remote hands are laid on heads  
As the blurred word bounces off the unyielding walls,  
Arriving sooner, or later, acoustically distorted,  
Twice blessed (at least) in my uncomprehending ear.  
The choir's fragmented polyphonic praisings  
Skitter around this vast and echoing nave  
Until, to the organ's thunderous proclamations,  
The priestly protagonists process again  
Back into my view and on and out of sight.  
This has all happened to someone else, not me.

Desirous of a decent view for once,  
In fantasy now I float free into the third dimension,  
Rising slowly above the serried ranks  
To hover, bird's-eyed in the middle air.  
No longer depressed by the gravity of the situation,  
Powered by my inflated personality,  
I swoop weightless over pulpit and organ-pipes,  
Pigeon-like, drop in on episcopally mitred heads,  
Dispassionately noting receding priestly hairlines.  
So that's what happens. I see it all at last.

Drifting higher, I perceive all this pomp and clerical circumstance  
As merely a shifting multi-coloured carpet on a distant floor  
From which thin sounds waver up towards the over-arching vault.

Now even the foursquare tower dissolves;  
The organ's utterance diminishes to a murmur,  
As my gondola soars past the tower's topmost pinnacle,  
Out and up into the bright, still upper air,  
To where cathedral, city, river and shining estuary  
Are part of a coloured counterpane laid on the flat earth;  
And all things: my empty seat far below,  
The songs of praise, the solid statement of the sandstone tower,  
Are one with birdsong and the sighing wind.

Is this God's vision of his diocese?  
So minute, so lacking in significance?  
Quickly, I pull in the string of my imagination's balloon  
And perch once more, deflated, safely small,  
Anonymous and earthbound.  
Time to greet friends and find the lavatories.  
Now where did I park the car?

# Liverpool Morning

*After Hillsborough*

**On this grey Liverpool morning the suburbs are empty:  
The early church-goers are already behind closed doors with God.  
But the Anfield streets are filling with streams of people  
Converging on the high cramped bulk of the stadium that has become a place  
of pilgrimage.**

**Already the line stretches back out of sight.  
All manner of folk come now to stand here, their differences unnoticed and  
unimportant.**

**They clutch flowers, or bear mementos of past glories:  
Offerings to lay at this shrine.**

**The indifferent walls of this football fortress rise above streets  
Strewn with wet litter and festooned with tributes.  
Here graffiti is transformed into homage  
On walls where old enemies have inscribed the end of ancient hostilities.  
Now even Mancs felt-tip their sorrow on red brick:  
Scrawled scripture of reconciliation and hope.  
And the line shuffles on endlessly,  
Round new corners, down narrow boarded streets in the dull morning,  
To pause briefly before the iron gates.**

**Here is the first centre of the feeling.  
The verses on cards, ink running down torn paper;  
The sentiments misspelt and trite yet tragically heartfelt.  
The simple outpourings of thousands for whom football is their faith.  
To these Shanks waits at the gates of heaven to receive his own;  
A tribal hero set in their eyes only a little lower than the angels.  
Here believers have honoured the trampled dead  
With long-cherished tokens, given up in their memory  
That here at least they may never walk alone.  
But we are borne forward on the tide at last  
Into the holiest of holies.**

No pictures could prepare for this:  
The stadium lies open, its hallowed turf transformed and diminished.  
The stands rise silently behind and to each side;  
But below the far terraces the goal is drowned in a wave of living flowers  
And flowers, fashioned into all manner of shapes  
And in a host of bright and beautiful colours  
Have flooded almost half of the field.

As the lines move slowly on over the laid tarpaulin  
Their offerings are taken and laid down in new rows  
On the living altar of this cathedral of flowers.  
It is silent here, but for subdued murmurings.  
The Kop has never been so still.  
Its terraces are hung with scarves and trophies, flags and banners,  
Peopled with the memories of its dead.

There are no songs today, and few words.  
They sit on scattered seats to think or pray  
Or just to be a part of what is happening here:  
The lying in state of a way of life.

And the crowds are marshalled relentlessly on and out  
Into the untidy shuttered Sunday streets.  
Tonight the gates will close upon a week of history  
And soon life will flow back.  
But today, for faithful and agnostic alike, this is the place to be.  
At this focal point of pilgrimage all belong together  
And uncertainty is stilled.

Outside there will be questions to ask, hard answers to be given  
And truths to be faced in the end.  
But despite doubts and misgivings, on this day it is surely fitting to be here.  
This unforgettable place, sanctified now by remembered suffering  
Unites all who have obeyed their instinct to follow a million others.

Tomorrow will be another day  
But today belongs to Liverpool and its dead.

*Anfield Football Stadium*  
*23 April 1989*

# Sonnet

Anxiety, still gnawing at the fear  
Of things unhatched, yet borne before their hour,  
Feeds on itself with many a pitying tear,  
Consuming reason with its nervous power.

Defeated counsel will not hear the word  
That lifts the terror from the burdened soul,  
But empty dies, and with its grief interred  
Buries the grace that can make all men whole.

In fearful vanity, the mind denies  
The risen power that turns aside life's blows,  
And still in solitary despair defies  
Imagination's insubstantial foes.

Till, emptying all into one perfect will,  
It yields itself and, knowing God, is still.



*'Sanctuary Evensong' begins a group of poems featuring the worship at Saint Faith's. It describes any winter Sunday evening service: the poems that follow it are a sequence picturing, in their journey through the Church's year, services peculiar to the occasions described.*

*Advent begins the Church's year, and, like Candlemas, the service takes place mostly by candlelight; in each case the poetic counterpoint is the background of violence and destruction in the surrounding streets (although it isn't usually as bad as it sounds) here. In between, 'Crosby Christmas' centres round Merchant Taylors' School's annual carol service, but opens out from there. Some lines near the end have been updated to take account of the changing world situation in the years since it was written but, sadly, it all still seems relevant.*

*The next poems deal with Lent and Easter. 'The Butterfly' was a real visitor (his kind flutter regularly through our services): but the occasion reflected in 'Requiem' was definitely a 'one-off' — the funeral of a respected member of the 'biker' community. 'Maundy Thursday Watch' explains itself ~ it was written over 25 years ago but could describe the same service today. The 'Sequence for Holy Week' takes and writes about each of the principal events in this most significant week of the Church's year; it has been slightly updated since first written but, again, portrays more or less how we observe Holy Week, at St Faith's today. Finally in this section we come to the 'Resurrection' of 'Easter Day, and associations with local, national and personal deaths and resurrections.*

# Sanctuary Evensong

Beyond the carved screen, darkness gathers;  
The wooden saints face outwards into shadow,  
Where pews sit, awaiting their Sunday resurrection.  
Shaped arches, vaguely seen, reach for the unseen roof.  
Above the distant font, traffic lights wash the windows with constantly  
changing colour,  
In the Epiphany crib the camels are etched with hooded light.

Where we sit, the light surrounds us:  
Grouped within walls of cool sandstone, wrought iron and polished wood.  
Branching brickwork soars to where the lamp's glare dazzles.  
The eye rests on the coolness of white and gold  
Around a painted crucifixion.  
Candles point upwards, flickering palely,  
As the pattern unfolds and again the Word is spoken.  
Cold breath wings like incense towards the barrelled roof.  
Where eight or ten are gathered together,  
Something is speaking to them, some presence surely unites them.

The organ's thunder startles the echoes.  
Prayers remember the dead and comfort the living.  
The blessing prods the faithful to their feet.  
The ritual is complete. The lights are out now.

We return into darkness.

*January, 1987*

## Advent Carol Service

The lights go down. Now in this shadowed place  
Only the chapel's arch, half-hidden, spills  
Its brightness out, haloing outlined heads  
Of those who wait the coming of the light.

*Raucous voices from the outer darkness:  
The harsh reality of a world of streets  
Untouched by any light.*

Until, unseen, the solemn voices rise  
And the first candles flicker into life;  
And thus begins the solemn counterpoint  
Of sentence, reading, hymn and anthems clear,  
Their harmonies a tapestry of sound,  
While two by two, the lofted tapers pass  
To build a soft and wavering walk of fire.

*Glass shatters on the scarred walls:  
Feet trample the silent graves,  
Bottles and needles lie among the sprawled flowers.*

God's word shines out, the tale unfolds again,  
The darkness dwindles and the promise grows:  
Emmanuel comes to ransom back his own.

*Street lights glare down on littered pavements.  
Traffic streams away from the crossroads.*

Now lights flood out: the Advent hymns are sung,  
The shadows shrink and radiance spreads again —  
Triumphant chant and solemn gospels speak  
The promise of eternity renewed.

*The storied glass glows with colour:  
Protected against the thrown stones  
Seeking to shatter what they cannot comprehend.  
Until all movement stills, the organ swells*

And, from the distant sanctuary, sounds  
The benediction that renews our lives,  
Sending us forth, rekindled in the faith,  
To bring into a dark and waiting world  
The light the Christ child waits to bring to life.

*The light shineth in the darkness  
And the darkness comprehendeth it not.*

*Advent Sunday 1997*

## Crosby Christmas

The turning year brings Christmastide to greet a waiting world,  
And over men and nations see its message now unfurled,  
As distant thoughts turn home again and wandering paths draw near  
To hearth and home and fireside and memories held dear.  
In countless homes now, harassed mums check lists and lay their plans,  
And scurry home from Sainsbury's weighed down with bags and cans.  
They shop around for gift-wrapped soap and nuts and tangerines;  
For cards with cosy messages and jolly Christmas scenes;  
While fathers long for mighty meals, old films and fat cigars,  
And children dream of talking dolls, computer games and cars.  
Now office boys and secretaries, made bold by party cheer,  
Think naughty thoughts and dream wild dreams to last another year.  
And Merchants boys assemble to perch on wooden pews  
To sing the well-worn Christmas hymns and hear the Christmas news.  
Once more their blended voices ring, the fair sounds rise and fall,  
As messages of love and peace waft gently over all.  
The dying echoes wander out and steal beneath the door,  
To lose themselves across the street in Crosby traffic's roar.  
One rising tide of happiness sweeps gloom and grief away,  
Till far and wide the bells ring out to welcome Christmas Day.

To other ears the Christmas bells toll out a different sound,  
And melancholy is the song their echoes ring around.  
They sound a world divided, by hatred torn apart,  
Where fear and doubt and misery clutch at the human heart;  
Where colour, race, or class or creed still sunder man from man,  
With all the ancient agonies heaped up since time began.  
Where greed and pride and selfishness rule in a world of fear,  
And violence and racial strife bring down the dying year.  
Those bells ring out in requiem for love and hope and trust,  
And peace lies broken, trampled down in grey and lifeless dust.  
Across the sea, yet close to home, the bombers' murderous blast  
Reaps still the senseless harvest of a long and bitter past.  
In Europe and in Africa the starving children plead  
In ruined towns and barren fields for pity on their need.  
All through the world, beneath their flags, the nations threaten war  
On refugees, on outcasts and all the helpless poor.  
Who have no love at Christmastime and none to hear their cry,  
As in the doorways of the world they watch our world go by.

Yet still the ancient Truth is shown to those with eyes to see:  
The Prince of Peace comes as a child in awe and majesty;  
The angel's song sounds clear above our world's discordant din,  
As still to willing hearts and minds the Christ child enters in.  
He comes between the drawn swords and the nations armed for war:  
A helpless outcast innocent as once he came before.  
In him alone is found our peace: the Life, the Truth, the Way;  
He comes once more to rule our hearts — Christ born on Christmas Day.

# Candlemass

As the year climbs out of darkness  
The ugliness of vacant minds still scrawls its graffiti on the hallowed stone  
And still the greenness of an early spring is disfigured by litter and by  
shattered glass.  
The faithful come in through streets where the old and the helpless are  
menaced or ignored,  
While we who care pass by on the other side.  
What hope here in the dark of a new year?

Within, the night is pierced by a hundred points of light:  
Filing two by two through high, columned arches.  
Faces are etched in cupped candlelight.  
Disembodied voices soar to the invisible high rafters  
As the spiralling smoke steals silently upward.  
In the silence, a rapt and tangible presence.  
Three priests, robed in solemn triptych behind the incense-wreathed altar  
Proclaim again the mystery of a faith renewed out of the darkness.  
In the shifting shadows a congregation stands in witness,  
Each face defined by the small halo of its flame,  
As the ancient pattern of Candlemas is shaped again.

Outside there is still darkness.  
But the light rekindled this night spills out into a world  
Where the nations at last are giving peace a chance.  
The deadly arsenals begin to dwindle;  
The armies are coming home, and old enemies  
Are reaching out cautious hands of friendship.  
As the lights go out after Candlemas, we go out into a world where hope is  
dawning.  
There is much to do and a long road yet to be taken.  
But it is better to light a candle  
Than to complain about the darkness.

*February 1989*

# Butterfly

The weather mild, unseasonably warm  
And in the church the heating works for once,  
Blaring dry gusty gales to swirl and rise  
Up to the distant lofty raftered roof  
Where dust lies dark and dry and decades deep.  
Mothering Sunday: children crowd the pews,  
A buzz of chatter, craning up to watch  
The puzzling pattern of the liturgy.

Observing all from the back pew's redoubt,  
I see the servers' solemn concentration,  
The choir saintly beyond the figured screen  
And flowers clutched in small and eager hands  
In touching tribute to a mother's love —  
The happy holy muddle of a day  
Relenting of its penitential mood  
To grant refreshment in our pilgrimage.

And then, unscheduled, in erratic flight  
A butterfly takes wing above the pews,  
Dipping and rising on its glittering way:  
Aroused too early from its winter sleep,  
Bewildered by the moving, glaring light  
To flutter in untimely resurrection;  
It swiftly surfs the tides of tepid air,  
Lost in a moment out of sight and mind.

When all is done and stillness falls again,  
Intent on vestry business, counting cash,  
My glance is held by brightness on the floor:  
The glinting coinage of a higher realm —  
A fallen angel, peacock-bright in death,  
Wings wide and still, the colours glowing deep,  
Back in a sleep with no awakening,  
While we still wait our Easter flight of faith.

*March 9th, 1997*

# Requiem

The night of Passion Sunday.  
An over-arching forest of branching beams;  
Deep-shadowed recesses opening into darkness.  
Before the screen's intricate carved tracery  
The choir, ranged in startling white  
Against the stark backcloth of the Lenten array,  
Are singing Requiem over a world in retreat.  
Here order springs from a sure foundation:  
Patterned arches, firm-bonded brick;  
A congregation cloistered and secure,  
And the sombre measure of music,  
Melancholy, melodic, plangent, profound;  
Reflecting purpose, certainty and peace.

By day, a biker's funeral.  
Here, too, there is order.  
A uniformed phalanx of followers,  
Leathered, badge-bedecked,  
Adorned with their tribal emblems,  
Clutching their spacemen's helmets,  
Quietly crowding the pews.  
Unmoving and attentive  
As the coffin is shouldered in  
On the broad, bowed backs of bikers

A rite of passage observed:  
Neither singing nor seeming to pray,  
Yet possessed of a proper dignity  
And, perhaps, a sense of the rightness of order  
In the face of an incomprehensible loss.  
They take their place in this parish church:  
Unfamiliar, yet still belonging.

**Unchurched, but here by ancient right;  
Outside, the gleaming, cherished machines  
Wait for the final ceremony to unfold:  
For order to be imposed on chaos,  
Before they roar off into an incurious world  
Which, doubtless,  
Will see in them only anarchy and disorder.**

**And also, outside these ordered worlds  
A litter of lager cans, vomit-stained walls  
And vacuous scrawlings:  
The marks of a generation untouched by certainties.  
And beyond these again, the fires burn in Strangeways  
And riot sweeps through the West End.  
A violence that is blurred and faceless,  
Baffling in its vicious and callous contempt:  
A distorted, formless hatred challenging our peace.  
Between those who wield power  
And those who seek only to claw them down  
A great gulf is fixed  
And seeming daily to grow greater.  
Where anarchy's evil growth flourishes  
No music has power to soothe or transform  
And even the comforting rituals of death  
Have nothing to say.  
To the victim defaced and struck down  
No order speaks.**

**Within this suburb church the pattern prevails  
And the divine harmony is still heard.  
Outside, Christ lies broken and bleeding  
In the indifferent streets of our cities.**

*April 1990*

# Maundy Thursday Watch

Tall arches spanning darkness;  
High invisible roof: warm still air.  
The shadowed crucifix outlined against carved beams.

And light spilling out through the pillars:  
Soft radiance from a firmament of flickering candles,  
Gold and white in the night, swaying shadows.  
Burnished sanctuary lamp mirroring the arc of fire below;  
Dark grouped leaves and boughs, and frozen flowers:  
Christ on the altar in Gethsemane.

The dull roar of traffic sounds outside the walls.  
Silent worshippers kneel or sit to keep their watch,  
With only the rustle of a page, the shifting of a chair  
To move the soft silence.  
Waiting for death to come to their Lord in the morning  
To bring them life.

Footsteps echo quietly down the dark aisle. The vigil  
Goes on. The faithful watch with Christ.  
Outside the cold midnight brings another Good Friday.  
Inside, no time, only the soft shadow of eternity.

Surely, God is here.

*April, 1973*

# A Sequence for Holy Week

**Palm Sunday: a journey undertaken.  
Strung out behind cross and choir,  
Two hundred straggle from the secular  
As the incurious cars stream past,  
Seeking a different consummation.  
Safely within the waiting church  
They reform in more purposeful procession,  
Parading palms, chanting almost in time,  
In hopeful pilgrimage to the Holy City.  
And now the Passion is acted out -  
Readers in solemn counterpoint,  
The practised crowd jeering in unison.  
A sombre, waiting stillness takes the place  
Of a confusion of circling movement.  
The first act and the first action are done.**

**Monday in Holy Week: a different journey.  
The woven stations of the cross  
Red and gold against pillars and brick walls  
Each in turn a focus of shuffling movement  
For those who come in from the darkness.  
In the lowered light the story unfolds  
From condemnation to crucifixion,  
Clustering round each resting place  
While womens voices, light and softly-pitched,  
Charged with a mother's empathy for a Son,  
Underscore the unyielding way of the cross.  
It ends in a quiet consecration.  
The calm offering of the Eucharist  
Draws all movement into its timeless pattern.  
The second act and its action are finished.**

**Maundy Thursday: the shortest journey.  
From pew and choirstall but a few steps  
to the altar where things broken are renewed  
And the ultimate mystery is made manifest.  
Standing in solemn expectancy  
At the point where the moving images are stilled,  
Witnesses to a sacrifice renewed,**

Young and old come together in commemoration  
Of a life laid down for the earths remaking:  
To share in the circling host.  
Then, in the cool, watching darkness,  
Flanked by unwavering candleflame,  
Christ rests again as in the tomb:  
The axis of the turning of the world.  
The third act rests from its pivotal action.  
Good Friday: the longest journey.  
First, the witnessing.  
Behind a wooden cross, through the everyday streets  
To sing slow choruses to the inevitable ecumenical guitars:  
The sound frail and uncertain,  
Drowned by the traffics ceaseless rumble,  
As nothing to those who pass by.  
Later, the patterned worship of the liturgy within:  
The altars stripped bare and waiting.  
Lifted by the choir's soft, hidden anthems,  
A veneration profound, silent and slow is offered  
Beneath the great carved crucifix -  
Christ suspended between earth and heaven -  
Shadowed against the black hangings.  
The fourth act is over: its action rests in the grave.

Easter Eve: a journey out of darkness.  
The new fire kindled in the blackness;  
Continents of light spreading outwards and upwards.  
The rising cadences of proclamation;  
The ancient stories of the listening vigil  
Spaced with the silences of the final waiting.  
And then suddenly the dazzling sunburst:  
The trumpeted glory of the certain resurrection -  
Golden and white, fully-flowered in light;  
The wreathed ascending clouds of the holy smoke;  
The high, impossible hymns of joy.  
In the far sanctuary, bishop and priests  
Celebrate again the paschal sacrifice  
In triumphant prelude to the splendours of the Easter dawning.  
The last act rests now in its final action.  
And this is its beginning.

*Easter, 1991*

# Resurrection

At this season, more than any other,  
That step forward from the darkness,  
Thronging the margins of the mind.  
Silently they rise up from the grave of memory:  
Some who have left their mark on this place and on us —Long-past  
worshippers congregating again,  
A parent mourned, a friend lost to the dark;  
Others known only to their God:  
Taken in their multitudes before their time  
By man's inhumanity to man.  
Their faces haunt us, their presence as real  
As the heavy clustered lilies given in their memory,  
Before they slip away into the shadows,  
Back to the borders of oblivion.  
But their death is only a beginning  
And our lamenting will have an end  
In the certain hope of the resurrection,  
The new fire, the fanfare of faith,  
When the past and the present come once more together  
And all things are made whole again in God.

Surely

*Easter, 1995*

*Two final poems do honour to the 'Person in the Pew' and to the 'Good old C. of E'. The first champions the ordinary Anglican churchgoers and does not necessarily bear any resemblance to anyone living or dead in any pew today — nor, naturally, is it necessarily intended to be any reflection on that revered body of people, the Anglican clergy.*

*The final poem, perhaps equally tongue-in-cheek in parts, sings the praises of the Anglican Church in general. It is a much-maligned body, the ready butt of fashionable jokes, but it weathers the storm, and continues in every generation to attract an intense loyalty in its more dedicated followers: a loyalty that ought to be the envy of, for example, political organisations. It is made up of Persons in the Pew as well as of the priests and bishops who lead them, and this book is dedicated to us all.*

# The Person in the Pew

*In remembrance of worshippers past and present*

I hail a quiet hero, the champion of the age,  
Unknown to fame and fortune, no strutter on life's stage;  
The humble representative of folk like me and you:  
I sing an unsung champion — the person in the pew.

He'll never hit the headlines; he'll rarely cause a stir  
(Forgive me, ardent feminists, if I say 'him', not 'her')  
But faithfully on Sundays you'll find him on his perch  
Upholding the traditions — a pillar of the church.

He sits where he has always sat while, all around him, change  
Brings odd new prayers and modern hymns and service orders strange;  
He pays his dues discreetly, signs covenants on cue:  
What would we do without him — the person in the pew?

Though prelates may pontificate and curates come and go  
The layman's there to hold the fort, and it was ever so.  
Should you seek a staunch supporter, you'll not have far to search:  
His presence keeps the roof on — he's a pillar of the church!

On High days and on holidays you'll find him in his place,  
In sober dress and countenance, and Church of England face.  
But mock him not nor spurn him, but give the man his due:  
He's the ultimate survivor — he's the person in the pew.

*October 1996*

# **The Good Old C. of E**

**I sing the Church of England:  
The good old C of E,  
Where I was born and nurtured:  
The only church for me.**

**They say that it's declining,  
Its numbers falling fast;  
But that's what they've been saying  
For many ages past.**

**And still it bears its witness  
In field and city square,  
For folk to stay away from,  
And yet be glad it's there.**

**From humble back-street mission,  
From proud cathedral tower,  
It still proclaims the message  
Of Christ's redeeming power.**

**Though God's imperfect vessel  
May steer through storm and gale,  
His love sustains its voyage;  
His promise will not fail.**

**What if the Church Commissioners'  
Investments don't suffice?  
The faithful few will fork out:  
Their love will pay the price.**

**The Nonconformist chapels  
Are dull though worthy places;  
We're Catholic yet Protestant:  
A church of many faces.**

**The Church of Rome's no better.  
Although I know it's wrong  
I have to tell them sadly  
They do not quite belong.**

**My church is one they laugh at:  
But let the sceptics sneer;  
When all the jokes are over,  
My church will still be here,**

**With happy-clappy choruses,  
Incense and vestments too -  
A church for saints and sinners:  
The church for me and you!**

**Some scuttle to the Orthodox  
And others run to Rome;  
We like our woken priests -  
And its cosy here at home....**

**Take heart then, fellow churchmen, Whose tastes agree with mine:  
'Ecclesia Anglicana'  
Won't wither on the vine.**

**I bid you raise your glasses  
And take a drink with me;  
I toast that great survivor:  
The good old C of E!**

*January 1995*

*October 1996*