

Descent

The earliest Christian poem or hymn we have, the *kenosis* poem in Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:6-11), describes a vertiginous descent. Christ Jesus, 'though he was in the form of God... emptied himself ... even to death on a cross'. Then in the poem's second verse he is 'exalted'. Our first article in this issue, 'The Cross' by Chris Griffiths, was originally written as a meditation for Good Friday, in which the cross can be reclaimed 'as a statement that love is stronger than death' and 'a manifesto of hope for a better, risen life' with the Easter triumph over the forces of death and hell.

This June *Sofia* is published in the season of Pentecost, which celebrates another descent, the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus' followers, together in one place. The Spirit comes down upon them like a rushing mighty wind and tongues of fire. In Luke's gospel (4:18-21) Jesus begins his ministry by going into the Nazareth synagogue and quoting the prophet Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...' Then he sits down and says: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled'. (The congregation try to throw him off a cliff.) At Pentecost that same Spirit descends upon his disciples after he has gone away. It is a creative Spirit and now the body of Christ on Earth becomes a social body, a body of people.

Jesus' proclamation of the 'reign of God' or reign of kindness is about a social descent, a vision of a fair, inclusive society. In his Beatitudes (Lk 6:20-22) the poor and hungry come first: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom.' Jesus' own descent to the depths and subsequent rising becomes a mission and a metaphor for humankind to include the depths of society in an abundant life for all.

A valuable insight of liberation theology is that Jesus was not killed *for* but *by* the sin of the world. His death was not a debt or ransom paid to God or the devil but an act of violence committed by forces ruling his world. It was a *structural* sin. In our second article, Edward Nickell writes about the structural sins today of poverty, racism and damage to the Earth.

Although responsibility for them is diffuse and complex, that does not mean that they are natural phenomena or disasters beyond human control. The concept of structural sin 'doesn't demand that we are wracked with guilt on an individual level, but also doesn't allow us to simply do nothing.'

In our third article 'Dissent, Descent, or just Decent?' Andy Kemp explores Methodism's 300 year identity crisis: the clash between descending to the poor and outcast (like Dinah the Methodist preacher in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*) and wanting to be regarded as respectable and 'decent'.

In our fourth article Edwin Salter descends into human frailty and reflects on pain – how some pain can be a useful warning, but definitely not all pain. He disputes whether pain is 'actively purifying' or 'may suffice as a just expiation'.

There is plenty more with no space to mention it in this brief editorial. But finally, I should point out the advertisement on the last page (27) for the SOF annual conference. Unfortunately, it will still have to be online but is full of opportunities to listen and discuss. It is free and everyone is invited to register at sofconference.org.uk/registrationfrm.html



The Lampedusa cross made from pieces of a boat wrecked on 11 October 2013 off the coast of Lampedusa. 311 Eritrean and Somali refugees were drowned. The Lampedusans helped to save the lives of 155 others. Francesco Tuccio, the island's carpenter, made each of the survivors a cross from the salvaged wood, and another for the British Museum, which is touring Britain at present. britishmuseum.org/collection