

# Finding God's Traces

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Illustrations by Jane Maisey rsj

# PREFACE

I love teaching but the job is not without challenges. Not so long ago, I was talking to a class about the experience of God.

‘Sir,’ interrupted one student. ‘Do you know the meaning of the word *hallucination*?’

He was certainly not the only person in the class prepared to be so disparaging.

I believe that the experience of God is real. It is as important as breathing and as natural. This doesn’t mean it is easy. We breathe in all sorts of gunk from the world around us: anger, violence, anxiety, hurt, confusion, manipulation, sexism, racism, a need to pass judgement on others, a need to pass judgment on ourselves and plenty of other toxins as well. God is like the fresh air for which we really long.

God gets a bad press. Practically every form of human nastiness is laid at God’s feet. It saddens me that God has been taken hostage by some of the most destructive forces in the world. What these people call God has nothing whatever to do with who God really is. There is no hatred in God. Of course, belief in God is hardly the flavour of the month. It requires a leap of faith and that leap is not without risks. It may even cost you friends. Atheism is trendy and plenty of people just follow the crowd. This book is written in the hope that others are prepared to be more authentic and original. God is beyond all clichés. Indeed, God is beyond all words but the two words that come closest are love and truth, the two most fundamental needs of the human spirit.

One of the most inspiring teachers I ever encountered, Chris Straford, told me once that atheism is a form of laziness. I knew what he meant. There are many things happening in the world that make it hard to believe in God. We all have to work hard for our faith and a lot of people prefer to work for money. Chris died at the start of 2017 at the age of 55, leaving his wife, Anna, and their four young children, one of whom, David, was just

about to start school. Chris had battled cancer for six months. He had been incredibly fit; there can't be too many other people in the history of the world who have cycled to their own palliative care. At the start of his journey with cancer, Chris said to me 'there will be grace in this'. He was right, but it was often a hard grace.

This book is written in the belief that God's grace will be part of every single one of your days, from the most joyful to the most sad. It provides something to ponder for every day of the year, something to remind you of the quiet depths of the catholic faith. It is called *Finding God's Traces* because, in a sense, I hope you might move into the future as detectives, always on the lookout for clues as to what God might be doing, searching for evidence of where God may be at work.

There are a couple of ways you might use this book. You might take a few quiet minutes to think and pray about what it offers for each day. There may be periods of your life in which it is more helpful in this way than at others. The book also has an index so you can find something relevant to a situation, problem or person which may be of interest or concern at any given time. The book follows the year as it was in 2017 with Easter on April 16.

Of course, Easter moves as well, so after the index there is a table of moveable days.

This book of reflections was originally put together for students graduating from Jesuit Schools in the Australian Province of the Society of Jesus. My hope is that *Finding God's Traces* will help you find prayerful moments and grow in your own spirituality through all that lies ahead. May it also help you to keep hearing the words of Jesus and encourage you to build around them a life of truth, generosity, compassion, service and love. A grateful thank you to Josephite Sister Jane Maisey for the wonderful illustrations in this edition. Special thanks are due to Jenny Scott, Richard Leonard SJ, Damien Nolan, Denise Campbell, John Honner and the Heads of the Australian Jesuit Schools who sponsored this project.

*Michael McGirr*

**JANUARY**

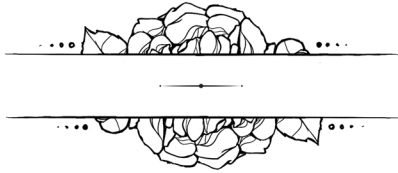
Venerable  
**Mary  
Ward**

1585 - 1645

**“Cherish God’s  
vocation in you.**

Let it be constant,  
efficacious and  
loving.”





*Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*

— *Luke 2:19*

## JANUARY 1

Many people make some kind of New Year's resolution which is often broken within a few days and forgotten not long after. Hopefully we can laugh a little at ourselves when this happens. It's silly to think we are going to change our character with a single decision. Human growth is made up of many small decisions and the same is often true of growth in faith. We mature slowly; God is more persistent than dramatic. It makes more sense to pray humbly for the help to live each day as God would hope rather than to try and have the whole year organised before it has even begun. We are more likely to come to understand and accept ourselves better that way.

Catholics begin the year by remembering Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Mary was a woman who understood the meaning of the word 'resolution' but she understood it a little differently than most of us. She knew that God had made a resolution about her: 'the Almighty has done great things for me'. She also understood that God has made a resolution about every human for every day of every year: 'his mercy extends from generation to generation'.

*Our sins do not flow from lavishness of spirit: they flow from huddling in the cave of fear, away from the great plans of God's creativity, his largesse. To ask Mary that she pray for us sinners is to ask that she help us walk with freed hearts, with resolute spirits. And to ask that she pray for us 'now and at the hour of our death' is to be realistic about how we are, and who and where.*

— *Peter Steele SJ, Bread for the Journey*

## JANUARY 2

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*You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day.*  
— Psalm 91:5

Somebody has counted 365 occasions on which phrases such as ‘don’t be afraid’, ‘fear not’ and ‘have no fear’ occur in the Bible. That is one for each day of the year. Those phrases occur in all sorts of situations, often at key moments. When the angel tells Mary she is to be the mother of Jesus, she is encouraged not to be afraid. The shepherds who are in the fields near Bethlehem when Jesus is born are also told not to be afraid. When Jesus calls his disciples from their nets, he gives them the same message as he does yet again when he appears to them after he has risen from the dead. Indeed, each of the four gospels presents the story of the Resurrection in a different way. But one theme they have in common is that people who encounter the risen Jesus, all of whom have reason to be anxious by normal standards, are urged to live without fear.

Fear is a prison. Of course, leaving your fear behind is easier said than done. But at every step of our lives, big and small, God’s invitation is to trust, to step out boldly. One of God’s most constant messages is ‘don’t be afraid’. God says it every day of every year.

*Those who love to be feared, fear to be loved. Some fear them, but they fear everyone.*  
— Jean Pierre Camus (1582-1652)

*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

— *Matthew 7:21*

## JANUARY 3

Christians believe that everyone is created in the image of God. This means that each of us, regardless of our social status or achievements, has a profound dignity and is entitled to be treated with more than indifference or even superficial courtesy. We are deserving of respect. Even when our behaviour lets us down and we fail to extend that respect to ourselves, we are still precious in the eyes of God. God calls us to something better.

Such dignity also brings with it responsibilities. We are stewards of creation and responsible for the care of our natural environment. We are brothers and sisters who have responsibility to care for each other and not to use each other, either sexually, emotionally, financially or in any other way. We are citizens of what Jesus called 'the Kingdom of God'. Christian morality is not an arbitrary collection of rules and regulations but a rich way of life developed over centuries of often difficult experience. It is designed to set us free, especially from pettiness and selfishness, and aims to create a more just world. To do this it places demands on us, the greatest of which is to gradually become the best people we can be, a better image of God.

*The Kingdom of God is within us; our all embracing duty is to give it form and effect, a local habitation and a name.*

— *Joseph Furphy, Such is Life*