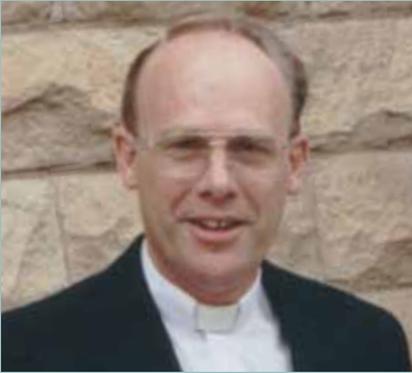
A photograph of a stone path leading through shallow water. The path is composed of rectangular, light-colored stones, some of which are partially submerged. The water is a deep blue color, and the path leads from the foreground towards the background, creating a strong sense of perspective. The overall scene is serene and contemplative.

Godly Steps

BISHOP BILL RAY



Bishop Bill Ray
Bishop of North Queensland

Lent is a gift, a gift of the Church that allows us to prepare for Easter, so that we can truly be people of the resurrection.

There are a number of aspects to keeping the season of Lent and one is being prepared to take risks in allowing ourselves to be challenged by the Scripture, the Lenten liturgies and through our studies. We can be challenged by the questions people ask about living the Christian life. The answers people give can also challenge us. I know from my own experience that at times when I have been challenged, I have felt uncomfortable, but the challenge has turned out to be an important growth period my faith journey.

It is vital that we seek to keep in step with God, but keeping in step is

something that we have to continually work at all the time. I pray that these studies, along with the Going Further Section and the Children's activities which are on the web, will enable you to be more in step with God, so that you can fully live into the joy of the resurrection this Easter.

Some of the questions invite you to share your thoughts or ideas. Please feel free to share what you are comfortable sharing. However, sometimes it is important that we take risks and allow ourselves to be vulnerable in our sharing. There are five studies based on the Old Testament Reading and the Psalm for Year A. Each study seeks to draw us closer to God so that we can keep in step with God.

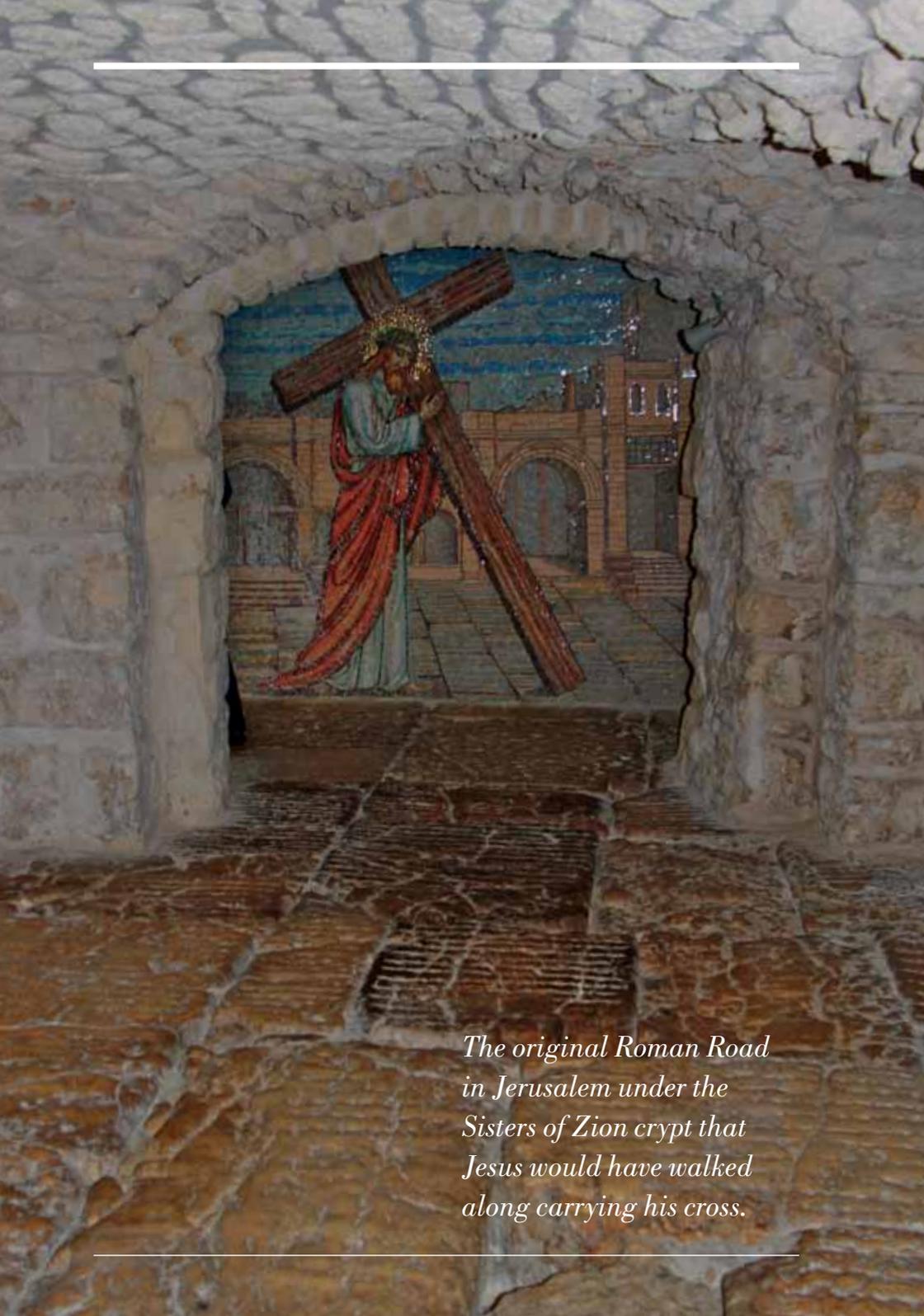
The resources I have used to write these studies are: Prayers are from A Prayer Book for Australia (APBA) Broughton Press 1995. Scripture quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV), Responding in Love by Anthony Dean, St Paul Press 1995 Texts for Preaching, Brueggemann, W, Cousar CB, Gaventa BR, and Newsome J, – Year A Westminster Press Kentucky 1995

I pray that you will have a holy and blessed Lent.

Bill Ray

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*The original Roman Road
in Jerusalem under the
Sisters of Zion crypt that
Jesus would have walked
along carrying his cross.*

BACKGROUND BASIS RE THIS STUDY

In each study there are two sets of questions.

The first group of questions relate the living out of our faith in the light of the Biblical passage and the Psalm for the week. No group would have the time to discuss all the questions and not all questions would be relevant to each group. Thus, you are asked to make a selection of the questions that best address the needs of your group.

The second group of questions (obtainable from the web) contain three questions based on the Old Testament Scripture reading and three based on the Psalm. It has been my experience that people want to grapple with the text and explore it. It is my hope that these questions will do this for group members.

In regard to the Psalm, Hebrew poetry is different to English poetry's rhyme and rhythm. Hebrew poetry has a structure known as "parallelism". There are basically three types of parallelism.

The first is synonymous parallelism where the second line restates or reinforces the first line. For example, Psalm 32:1, "Blessed are those whose sin is forgiven: whose iniquity is put away."

The second is antithetical parallelism where the second line states the opposite of the first line such as in Psalm 32:11, "Great tribulations remain for the ungodly: but whoever puts their trust in the Lord, mercy embraces them on every side."

The third is synthetic parallelism where the second line may build on or expand the meaning of the first line. An example is Psalm 95:2, "Let us come before his face with thanksgiving: and cry out to him joyfully with psalms".

A Study Bible or bible commentaries may also add to your understanding of each reading, so do not be afraid to use these types of extra resources.

I trust this information is helpful in grappling with the biblical passages studied this Lent.

1 *Study 1* *Our actions* *have consequences*



DON'T STEAL
THE GOVERNMENT
HATES COMPETITION

Malachi 3:8

*Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?"
In your tithes and offerings!*

At the start of Lent we are challenged about how we address the reality of sin in our lives. This is an important, but demanding challenge. It has been said that some parts of the Church have been soft on sin and over-emphasised the place of love. In the Christian life we need to understand the reality of sin and the demands of loving God and our neighbour. Living in the love of Christ is not always easy.

This reading about the temptation and fall from Genesis (2 & 3) along with the Psalm 32 challenges us to consider how we step out with God and address the matter of sin in our lives. As I reflect on these two passages I am reminded of the expression that I heard from a teacher; that every action has its consequences. Thus, sin impacts our lives and our relationship with God and other people.

The Genesis reading is the account of creation, humanity and the existence of sin. “The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents that fullness of knowledge which belongs to God alone. To seek such knowledge is to deny dependence on God.” (i) It is very easy to focus on ourselves and not on God. As Christians it is important that we make sure we are in step with God. Yes, at times we fail; at times we sin.

However, first we must understand the nature of sin.

Life continues to change. There was a time when the Church could assume a certain body of knowledge about the Christian faith because Sunday Schools were lively and religious education was more broadly taught in our schools. Many people could define sin, but this is not the case today.

One of the tasks before the Church is to assist people in their understanding of the real existence of God, the nature of God and to highlight that God knows and is interested in each of us. While we often sin, it is important that we tell the good news that God forgives sin, if we confess or to use another word, repent. Sin is any thought, word or action that separates us from God. In my ministry I find people ask for examples, so here are two examples of sin. We have the Ten Commandments and the ninth commandment says that we are not to bear false witness which is not to tell lies. If we tell a lie it is important to say sorry to God, say sorry to the person we lied to and to seek God’s strength to address this matter in our lives. Another example is that Jesus exhorts us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-44). This is an area I have had to work hard at

over the years. Sometime back I was given advice and it has turned out to be good advice. First, keep praying for that person who you think is your enemy and God will open the door to move forward. Sometimes that door opens in ways that I don't expect. Nevertheless, I have found that advice does work. The hardest step is to start praying.

Confessing our sin is making a "U" turn. It is so easy to be out of step with God and we move away from God. When we realise that we have moved away from God we will want to move back to be with God, so we make a "U" turn, turn back to God so we can be in step with God.

Repentance or confession involves three distinct actions. First, we must own up to our sin with God and acknowledge that we have done wrong. Second, if we have wronged someone else we must say sorry to that person. The third key aspect is seeking God's help in overcoming that weakness in our lives, or to express it another way, to amend our lives.

We are all sinners. Every Christian has to address sin in their lives. In most, if not all worship services, we have a confession and an absolution.

The confession is a specific opportunity in the liturgy for us to repent. The absolution is a statement that God forgives us of our sin, if we truly repent. There are several absolutions in A Prayer Book for Australia. One starts off in this way, "God is slow to anger and full of compassion, forgiving all who truly repent and trust in his Son as Saviour and Lord" (p.175).

Another absolution states, "God pardons all who truly repent and believe his holy gospel" (p. 5). Note that we are to truly repent. We cannot be half-hearted about repenting of our sin, we must truly repent. That is, we need to clearly name our sins. Psalm 32 commences with "Blessed are those whose sin is forgiven: whose iniquity is put away". In other words, for a full and happy life we need to know the power of forgiveness in our lives. The Psalm goes on in verse 3, "For whilst I held my tongue (that is, not confessing sin) my bones wasted away". In verse six, the Psalmist continues, if we acknowledge our sin, and do not hide our wickedness, but confess our sin, the Lord will forgive us. We can only know that we sin if we know the word of God, the Gospel; the Good News of Jesus Christ. So it is important that as Christians keep growing in the knowledge of the Scriptures.

It is through growing in our knowledge of the Scriptures and confessing our sins, that the final verse of Psalm 32 becomes a reality, “Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous, and be glad: and shout for joy, all you that are true of heart.” (i) p. 28, Responding in Love, A. Dean, St Paul’s Press, 1995.

INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

Group members are invited to share one or more of the following:

- Introduce yourself. If you know each other fairly well share something that others may not know about you that is of interest.
- Share a faith joy from last Lent or share a faith joy since last Lent.
- Share an expectation that you have for this Lent.
- If you feel comfortable, share an occasion when an action on your part resulted in certain consequences.
- Share how you prepare for worship.

At the conclusion of this session attend to housekeeping matters:

- Establish if anyone has any dietary requirements.
- Who will prepare morning/afternoon tea or supper?
- There may be a need to clarify meeting venues and transport.
- Refer to page 44 and re-enforce the points of participation, confidentiality and the ground rules for the group.

OPENING PRAYER

(Say together and add any other prayers that are applicable.)

Almighty God,
whose Son fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet did not sin:
give us grace to direct our lives in obedience to your will,
that, as you know our weakness,
so we may know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ our Redeemer,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

GETTING STARTED

(Make a selection)

- In what ways do you strive to be in step with God? Share an experience.
- What preparations do you make for worship?
- What does the confession in the service mean to you?
- In what ways are the Ten Commandments still relevant today?
- What is the place of Sunday School or other Children's ministry activities in your Church?

SCRIPTURE READING

(Suggest the texts are read aloud.)

Genesis 2:15-17 & 3:1-7

Psalms 32

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

(Please make a selection)

Additional questions on the biblical readings can be found on line at www.grassroots.com.au/Studybooks/GoingFurtherLent2014.htm

1. What are some of the changes you have experienced in the life of the Church? Do you think that these changes have been positive? Explain.
2. Do you think the Church has focussed on love and not given the same balance to the reality of sin?
3. When you hear the absolution or Scripture sentences announcing that God forgives, what are some of your thoughts and responses?
4. Share your thoughts as to whether the Church should undertake more teaching in the area of sin and forgiveness. Are there any actions you or the group would like to take? Explain.
5. It has been said that the Psalms taken together cover all facets of life. Share how Psalm 32 speaks to you? What insights have you gained?
6. It has been said that the Christian faith is infectious? In what ways can we share our faith? How can we show that even though life may not be easy, God is with us? Do we shout for joy enough?

-
7. Christians know that God forgives. How can we share the Lord's forgiveness?
8. If you were asked by a seven year old, a seventeen year old and seventy year old to tell them about sin, what would be your response?

DURING THE WEEK

Reflect on this session and if there are any insights, questions or thoughts jot them down and bring them next week to share with your group.

CLOSING PRAYER

Have a time of prayer, giving thanks to God for the insights, challenges and blessings that are ours because of this study.

To conclude you may like to say together this prayer for the week from A Prayer Book Australia.

O Lord, who for our sake fasted forty days and forty nights:
give us grace to use such abstinence,
that, our flesh being subdued to the spirit,
we may ever obey your godly will
in righteousness and true holiness;
to your honour and glory,
who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
one God, world without end. Amen.

Refreshments and Fellowship

PREPARING FOR NEXT WEEK

Read: Genesis 12:1-4a & Psalm 121.

WORTH THINKING ABOUT - STUDY 1

Are standards slipping?

From time to time we often hear that this or that standard in the community is slipping. Education is one such area. Sometimes in the Church we hear that the disciplines of yesteryear have been lost or faded out.

When I was confirmed I was told of the importance of preparing for worship. The clergy person of the day, used to say that if you do not prepare for worship you may not receive much from worship. He went on to say that we should prepare in two areas, the physical and the spiritual. In regard to the physical, we should make sure our shoes are clean, our finger nails are clean and that we come to worship with a clean handkerchief. Yes, I know all very quaint, but not unimportant as a discipline.

In regard to the spiritual, we prepare in three areas. First, we reflect on the blessings of the past week and identify for whom or what we will thank God. Second, spend time reflecting on the week and how we will use the time before the confession to repent of our sins. Third, spend time contemplating who needs our prayers and for the events coming up that you will bring before God in prayer.

One of the key expressions I recall from my Confirmation preparation is, "Worship is not a spectator sport; you will only get out of worship what you put into your preparation."

QUESTIONS

The Psalmist says, "Let us go to the house of the Lord" (Psalm 122:1b)

In what ways do you prepare to go to the house of the Lord week by week?

Do you think our worship standards are slipping? Share your thoughts.

If you were asked by a person who had just come to faith how should they prepare for worship, what suggestions would you make?

EXTRA CONSIDERATION

If you have time, consider SOME of the following quotes on temptation.

Do you feel they are on the money, and what do they say to you?

“He who is not tempted, what does he know? And he who is not tried, what are the things he knows?”

Ecclesiasticus

“Temptation is a woman’s weapon and man’s excuse.”

H. L. Mencken

“There are several good protections against temptation, but the surest is cowardice.”

Mark Twain

“All men are tempted. There is no man that lives that can’t be broken down, provided it is the right temptation, put in the right spot.”

Henry Ward Beecher

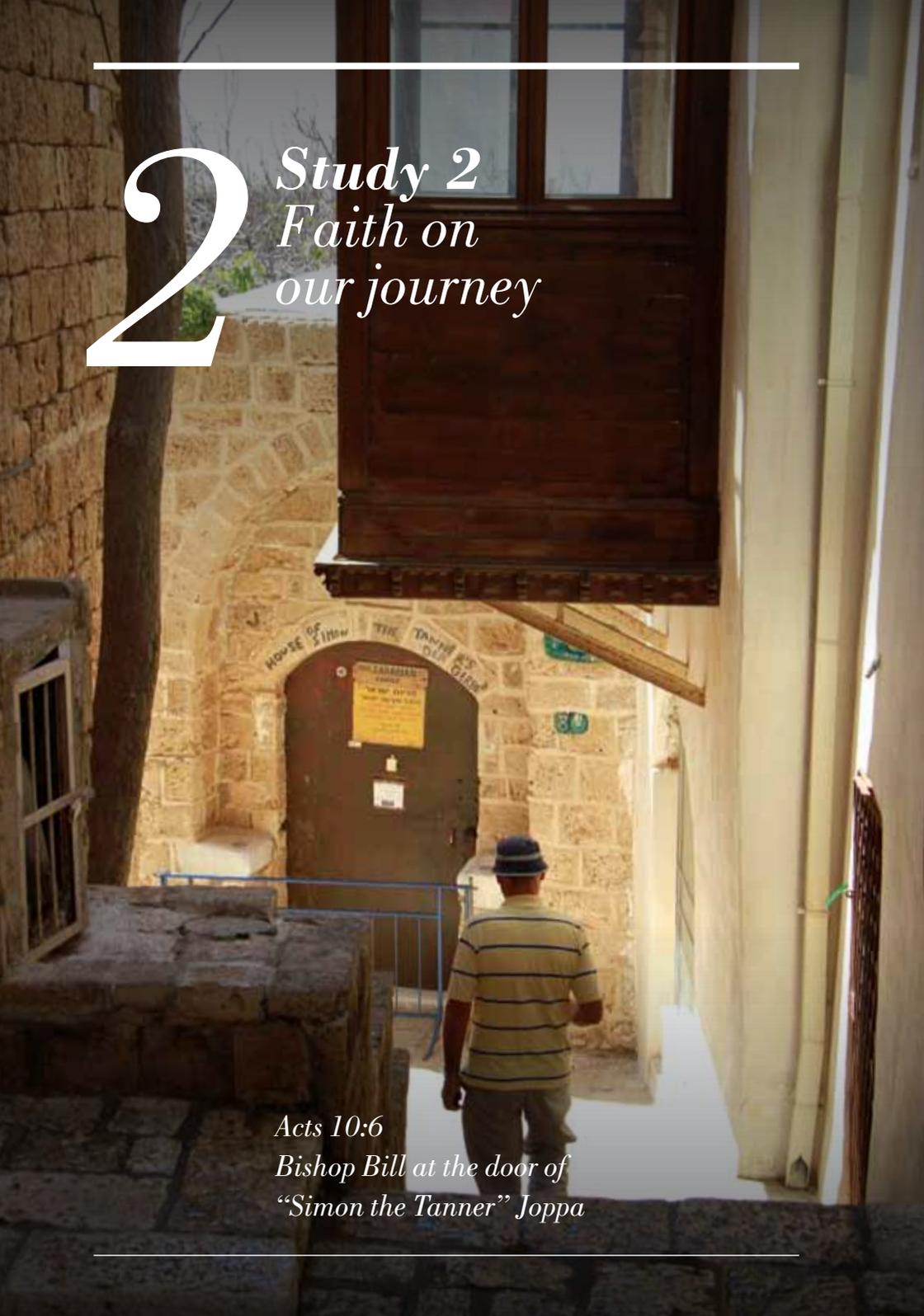
“Pervading nationalism imposes its dominion on man today in many different forms and with an aggressiveness that spares no one. The challenge that is already with us is the temptation to accept as true freedom what in reality is only a new form of slavery.”

Pope John Paul II

“A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is... A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in.”

C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

2 *Study 2* *Faith on* *our journey*



Acts 10:6
Bishop Bill at the door of
“Simon the Tanner” Joppa
