

Sunday between 25th September & 1st October

PENTECOST 17, Year B Responsibility: Canon Barlow

What a strange and bloodthirsty and non-Christian passage we have put before us today as the First Lesson! Can we really "hear the word of the Lord" and give thanks for it in this extract from the Book of Esther? It would appear that the point of it is for us to see that the Jews of the day were saved by God from extermination and given relief from their enemies, and that they were to commemorate this as a time when sorrow was turned into gladness, and a time of mourning into a time of rejoicing. The Jews still celebrate this occasion as the Festival of Purim - a popular festival of parties and merry-making. Purim is a happy reminder that while evil may seem all-powerful at times, it can be defeated if people of good faith work together.

How historically accurate the story is, is open to some doubt. The book does not contain an explicit reference to God, or to the religious practices of Judaism. It does imply that God protects His faithful people. The story is placed during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus [A-has-u-erus] or Xerxes [Zerksees] in 486 to 465 B.C. The majority of the Jewish people had been taken into captivity and transported to Babylonia. There was a beauty contest of the most beautiful young women in the empire - the King was looking for a new wife. Esther a young Jewish girl, was chosen, and became Queen of Persia. Because the Jews would not allow themselves to become assimilated, but doggedly stayed as a people in exile, hostility broke out between the Israelites and the Amalekites, reviving ancient feuds. Mordecai, a Jew, ran foul of a high court official, Haman, an Amalakite, who drew to the attention of King Xerxes the exclusiveness of the Jews. Xerxes granted Haman permission to issue an edict for the wholesale massacre of the Jews. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Mordecai persuaded Queen Esther, his cousin, to risk her life on behalf of her people by going to the king, even though an unsummoned visit was punishable by death. And that is where today's Reading begins. The tables were turned on Haman, who was hanged on the towering gallows (50 cubits equals 83 feet!) that he had had built for Mordecai. His ten sons were executed with him, thus bringing the last of the Amalekites to an end. The 14th and 15th days of the month Adar in the Jewish calendar (February - March in ours) were declared days of rejoicing..

Although the author of this book does not refer to religious matters, its nationalistic theme is basically religious in character. It expresses the conviction that God has called His people to be separate from the world and has promised to vindicate them against all their enemies. In the light of the history of the Jewish people it is not hard to see why this book and the Festival it created, is popular with that persecuted race. I do not know why the book was selected to be part of the Old Testament Canon, apart from that popularity with the Jews. Nor do I know why the extract appointed for today's First Reading was considered of importance, but I thought you might be interested in its origin and setting.

- Today's Gospel Reading follows straight on from last Sunday's. You may remember that the disciples had been-arguing about who was the greatest in the apostolic band: Andrew,. the first to follow perhaps; or his brother Peter whom Jesus nicknamed The Rock because of his expression of faith; or perhaps Judas, the treasurer. Jesus reminded them that His Kingdom was not about kudos or fame, but humility and service. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." This saying of our Lord's occurs several times or another. Indeed Mark quotes it again wants to be great among to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mk.10:43-45) Luke and Matthew quote similarly. And Jesus took an infant in His arms, saying: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me but the one who sent me." The true disciple achieves greatness not by holding high office, but by doing services for insignificant people, like this child. The classic example of such service is, for instance, the late Mother Teresa.

Then John abruptly changes the subject: "We saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us." How difficult it is to accept that other people, other denominations, and perhaps even non-Christian religions might have insights into the will and the way of God that we ourselves have not yet come to! Having been brought up in a particular tradition and expression of worship, or having chosen it because of its appeal to us, tends to set our prejudices that of course our way is the proper way! "You can worship God in your own way and we will worship God in His own way."! And of course because a particular style and indeed a particular interpretation of the Scriptures appeals to us, we become convinced that it is the only really true way. To some extent this is right and healthy - to chop and change between expressions and understandings of worship and Scripture may well indicate a broad and accepting mind. It might also lead to a confusion and to vague generalities. We must keep an open mind and be prepared to learn, as we observe other people at worship.

History records that the early Christians were often faced with the problem of the pagan exorcist who successfully used the name of Jesus for purposes of exorcism, without becoming a Christian. Possibly this was the first of such pagan, even superstitious, incidents where the name of Jesus was invoked. Our Lord did not seem to mind that His name was being used by-an unbeliever - the important thing was that the work of casting out demons was being done. And of course, once a person recognizes the power of Jesus, and works in His name, then there is no way that he could ever become an enemy of Christ. Jesus would want to encourage any indication of interest in His work and of the disciples'. A first sign might be a kindly action to someone known to be a follower - even a cool drink on a hot day. And woe betide a disciple who discourages the first timid steps of a would-be follower! The term "one of these little ones" is often taken to refer to little children, harking back to earlier in this chapter when Jesus took a child in His arms and said: "Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me." But in the verses following, we have a dramatic contrast between the thought of service to others and the timid approach to Christ, with the opposite thought of hindering or obstructing any who might be small, even childlike, in their faith, and who

need building-up and encouraging. It is a very "over the top" warning of the severity of punishment in store for those who discourage any from their following of Christ. Sometimes strange people turn up at church, or people who don't fit our ideas about "properness", or who perhaps we don't like or approve of. And we are tempted to discourage them, freeze them out, talk about them disparagingly. We must be so careful not to put stumbling blocks in their way - for surely these are the little ones of whom Jesus spoke.

From the warning of causing others to stumble is now added the warning of stumbling ourselves on our Christian journey. Again it is a very dramatic illustration which even the most literal of Bible believers accept as not meant to be followed as read - the removal of such parts of our bodies as cause us to falter . But we do need to strongly put away from us those things which cause us to stumble: things we do; places we go; sights we look at.

The very unpleasant alternative to entering the Kingdom of God is not really meant to be explicit teaching about the fate of the lost, but is a quotation of traditional language which all would recognise. It comes from the final verse of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah actually. The original word for hell was Gehenna - a valley near Jerusalem where once children were sacrificed to the god Moloch. Later it be-came a refuse dump for the city, thus explaining the imagery of worms and fire, from the maggots in offal there and fires smouldering perpetually in the refuse. Because of all these bad associations, the Jewish imagination had come to picture 'Gehenna - hell - as the place of future torment for the wicked: an image of utter horror.

And then to end on a cheerier note, Jesus encourages His followers to be like salt: an essential and valued ingredient in food to make it tastier and tangier, whereas otherwise it would be flat and boring. The words echo those in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus said to His disciples: "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?" (Matt.5:13)

So at the end of today's Gospel passage He says to us: "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another." In other words, be alive, be active, be vital, put some tang into your life as you follow Christ - and live in peace with one another. **AMEN**

Sunday between 2nd & 8th October

PENTECOST_19, Year B

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"Jesus said to the disciples: Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."
Mark 10:11& 12

A very hard saying. And the marriage of divorced people by the Church is something that the Church had been wrestling with for many years, This was not to dodge the issue or to get away from it, but with a desire to be faithful to our Lord's teaching, and also to help people who have the need to remarry whilst the first partner is still alive.

While the words of Jesus seem uncompromising, we have to decide enunciating a standard and a principle towards which Christians are called to strive, or whether this is an unbreakable law. Opinions in the Church vary..

At a Special Synod of the Diocese of Willochra held in 1979, the Bishop (Bruce Rosier) was asked to draw up Guidelines which would see our Lord's teaching as a standard and a principle, and also would allow in certain situations, remarriage in church of people whose first marriage had failed. At that time each congregation was asked to consider the matter, and either accept the practice or reject it. That process was done right across the Anglican Church of Australia. In 1981 General Synod passed an Ordinance to regulate the practice, in the Anglican Church, and our own Diocesan Synod ratified it a year or so later.

As requested, the Bishop drew up quite extensive Guidelines, and Bishop David McCall endorsed them, with the added requirement that at least one of the couple should be a worshipping member of a congregation. However, no clergyman is compelled to conduct a marriage ceremony, whether involving divorced people or not - the Civil Law makes that clear.

So how is it that we dare set aside what appears to be a direct instruction from our Lord as we have received it in the Gospels?

As I said earlier, it is not always clear whether some of our Lord's statements are laws or whether they are standards. For instance in last Sunday's Gospel reading we heard Jesus saying: "If your hand causes you to sin, or your foot, cut it off; if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out - better to enter life maimed or lame or partially blind, than to be thrown into hell."

We are glad to accept these as principles, underlining the seriousness of sin, but no-one takes them literally.

There is a further complication, caused by a slightly different reporting of Jesus' words. St.Matthew quotes Him as saying: "Everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress (5:32). An excusing clause has been included in this version, which tends to suggest a principle rather than a law.

The modern and recent reform of the Civil Law regarding divorce does not require proof of guilt or misconduct - that the marriage has failed is sufficient. So the Church cannot even remarry the so-called "innocent" party - in the eyes of the Law there is none, and the Church cannot presume to judge if the Law does not.

In his Guidelines with respect to marriage, Bishop Rosier set out very well what should be our approach to both marriage and remarriage. I quote at some length:

"Jesus taught that what God has joined together, man ought not to put asunder, and that divorce and remarriage involves the persons in adultery. This is part of His wide and deep teaching about our calling to love and serve God, to love and serve our neighbours and our enemies, to be generous, merciful, compassionate and forgiving, to be perfect like our heavenly Father. Such a high calling is possible only with the help of God. In our frailty and folly we do not always act according to the teaching of our Lord, and we often fall into difficulty by our neglect of His grace. We allow our relationships to get worse, and a couple may grow apart and not take enough trouble to seek and offer forgiveness to each other. They may nurse some grievances, and neglect to work at reconciliation, and the marriage that began with such fine hopes gradually becomes a bitter and not a joyful relationship. Marriages break down, divorces take place, and there is sorrow, anger, grieving, as well as relief. In cases of unhappy marriages we ought to direct the men and women concerned to the overflowing love and grace of God, His capacity to give us new beginnings. We ought to encourage every effort towards sustaining the relationship towards reconciliation, to overcome slackness or covetousness, to be genuine and realistic, to be fair with the finances, the children, to have compassion for each other. Recognising the high calling of Jesus with respect to marriage, yet there may be occasions when a clergyman believes it right to celebrate a marriage with the rites of the Church between persons one or both of whom have been divorced. If in such cases he is sure that he is acting in accordance with the teaching of Jesus and with the teaching of the Anglican Church of Australia, he is required to refer the matter, with detailed reasons, to the Bishop. The Bishop will consider the matter and will decide whether or not the request to celebrate the marriage with the rites of the Church is to be granted. It is important to make it clear to people concerned that the final decision rests with the Bishop (who will always consult the clergyman), and that he may give or he may not give permission to celebrate the particular marriage,. No clergyman is required to act against his conscience in the matter, but if he does not wish to be involved in any marriage of divorced persons with the rite of the Church, then he is asked to refer any such requests to the Bishop. If after consideration the Bishop is prepared to give permission, the Bishop or his deputy will be ready to conduct the ceremony." End of quote!

All this has been quoted at length to set before you the great seriousness which we in this Diocese approach the dilemma of trying to be obedient to Jesus and yet, in accordance with His gentleness with people in trouble, to help them. Obviously it is easier for a clergyman to present a sympathetic report to the Bishop when he knows the people and their situation. Probably the crucial test is whether or not a church wedding and the counselling which precedes it, will help the applicants forward in their relationship with each other and with God. If people have made solemn

promises to each other before God and have not been able to keep them, then before doing so again they need to be made more aware of the seriousness of what they are doing than they probably were previously. Today, sadly, many people tend to take the easy way out and separate if the going gets rough in married life. It is a tendency supported by novels, films and T.V. programmes, as well as by so many people in the public eye. There was a man who said that he expected his marriage to fail because the marriages of all successful men failed! Apart from the inaccurate generalization, he was not a successful man, even though his marriage did fail!

"To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live. This is my solemn vow and promise."

How can such a solemn vow and promise be kept but by the grace of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit? With so many people today neglecting to seek God's spiritual strength through the Sacraments, is it any wonder that the failure rate of marriage is so high? "Therefore what God has joined together, let no-one separate," said Jesus. Clearly it is God's will that divorce and separation should never happen. But when it does, and there is opportunity for one or other of the separated partners to begin a new relationship which will enable them to mend their damaged lives, then the Church - we - should endeavour to play a role in the healing through sympathetic support, through counselling, through the Sacraments - including that of the Marriage Service.

AMEN

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

Once upon a time there was a missionary working in deepest, darkest Africa. He was trying hard to convert a very old native chief to Christianity. The missionary was rather Old Testament minded and his version of Christianity leaned heavily on the "thou shalt nots". The native chief listened patiently. "Have I got it right?" he said at last. "You tell me that I must not take my neighbour's wife." "That's right," said the missionary. "Or his ivory or his oxen." "Quite right." "And I must not dance the war dance and then ambush him on the trail and kill him."

"Absolutely right." "I cannot do any of these things!" the savage said regretfully. "I am too old. To be old and to be a Christian - they are the same thing!"

How many people, I wonder, don't bother about going to church or thinking much about God, let alone worshipping Him, because they picture Christianity as joyless, restrictive, and sour? How many think of religion as the enemy of life and of the pleasures of living? How many see the Church with its high standards, as interfering with mankind's fine, free, gratification of its natural instincts - a term incidentally which usually means only one instinct!

In our anxiety to preserve our neighbours from ways which lead away from eternal life, we may forget to present the joyful alternative. Perhaps we ourselves have forgotten that God is the source of all joy and pleasure, that we are meant to enjoy life in Him. Perhaps we are only good because, like the cannibal chief, we cannot be bad; or perhaps like a person who does not commit adultery - not because it is wrong, but out of fear of AIDS, venereal disease, or scandal.

And because people see only narrowness and joylessness, they react by rejecting religion altogether, probably announcing with pride that they are choosing life instead. They do not seem to equate that kind of lifestyle with all the woes and problems which self-seeking leads to: alcoholism, drugs, broken families, gambling addiction, psychiatric trouble - you name it, the counselling services are busy. That is not good news. But unfortunately all too often our lives hardly proclaim that we know and live by the Good News of Jesus Christ and rejoice in the freedom which living in Him brings.

The rich man who figures in today's Gospel was a good man. He had been brought up to keep the Law of Moses. Yet he was aware that something was lacking, something which his dogged determination in observing the requirements of legalism could not provide. He recognised in Jesus that here was one who knew the answer: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus of course could see in the man his ideals and hopes, his sincerity, his honesty, his strengths - and his weaknesses. So He applied the big test. First He advised him to keep the commandments. What a disappointment! He'd been doing that all his life, grimly obeying all the little rules which had come to be interpretations of the Big Ten, doing the external actions, trying to satisfy his spiritual hunger. And it hadn't worked. And Jesus knew he had been trying, and knew why he was dissatisfied. Surely His heart went out to him. As Mark tells us: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him" -

and challenged him with the only remedy: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (Mk.10:21)

This of course is not meant for everybody as a test of their willingness to serve Jesus. Here is a special case, an earnest soul worthy of a challenge. And it was a big test for this wealthy man. "Lay aside your wealth and your honoured position in society and take your place with the poor shabby followers of an itinerant preacher." It was a big stake to risk, but the prize would be the friendship of the Son of God. "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." There was something ^he valued more highly than what his soul desired.

Perhaps you feel that Jesus was a bit tough on this chap. Be assured that many servants of God have risen to this same challenge. Saul, the wealthy and brilliant Pharisee, gave fame and fortune away to become Paul the Apostle. Francis, of Assisi, was another who rejected the wealth of his family to become a poor monk. Albert Schweitzer was a doctor not only of medicine but also of music and of literature, and he chose to found a medical service in a disease-ridden part of Africa. And still today men and women give up well-paid professions to serve God and His Church in various ways.

It is sometimes assumed that Jesus was on the side of the poor, and that He was opposed to the rich. Holy Scripture says nothing of the kind. People who hold that opinion have not read their Bible carefully enough - or more probably, not at all, but just heard what they wanted to hear. In response to that wealthy man's inability to rise to His challenge, Jesus said, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' No condemnation of wealth, just understanding of the power of the temptations which wealth can provide. Poverty also provides its temptations to avoid worship and service. There are those who feel they cannot afford to go to church, because a collection plate will be put under their nose and there will be fund-raising events they would be expected to be involved in. If payment was necessary we would surely install turnstiles or have a ticket box at the door! We take it for granted that people gladly contribute to the support and maintenance of the Church and the extension of its work, out of love of God and the desire to provide for a worthy place of worship and a ministry made available, according to their means.

In our Lord's day it was considered that wealth was a sign of God's favour on a man. Furthermore, a rich man could obey the commandments because he could buy the services of others, so that he could remain ceremonially clean. He would not work on the Sabbath - he could get somebody else to do it for him. He would not be likely to covet because he had ample for himself - although often the possession of things leads to the desire to obtain more, and more, and more.

Are we any better off today? Is there any more danger in having wealth today than there was in Jesus' day? Certainly the possession of a car, a caravan, a boat, a 34-channel T.V. set may tempt a person to use them rather than attend worship. But then, to go to church just because you can't afford to do anything else is to go for the wrong reason!

.No, the danger is that possessions lull us into a sense of false security. We have so many things, that we overlook that which we really need: trust in God and complete dependence upon Him.

"Thou shalt not enjoy life" was never Christ's teaching. But "Beware of material possessions" was, and it is still relevant. We are all rich to some degree, for we all have possessions which we value, and there are always more things which we would like to have. The hanging-on to what we have and the striving after other things are real temptations and pressures to lure us away from Christ's service. That is why Jesus warned of their danger. As did St. Paul. Writing to Timothy he wrote: "Charge the rich of this world not to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed." (1 Tim.6:17-19)

Material possessions are just that - things of this world. And we will leave them behind when we leave this world for the life to come. How will we fare then if we have concentrated on the things of this world, and neglected to seek the riches of life in Christ? **AMEN**

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

But first of all a word about the first and second Readings. Poor old Job! What a rebuke to get from God: "What right have you got to question me?" The whole book is a story to illustrate the supremacy of God, and although we often cannot understand Him and His ways, we are to accept what happens to us as His design for us, according to this book. It was of course written prior to the teaching and example of Jesus, who has greatly widened our understanding of the will of the Father, which is that none of His little ones should suffer - suffering is against His will and He helps us to combat and cope with it, rather than to bow meekly and say "It is the will of God".

In the story Job is shown to be a good man. Satan argues with God that Job is good only because God has blessed him with great prosperity. God tells Satan that if even if he does his worst to Job, Job will still remain faithful. So Satan strips Job of all his possessions – in a series of terrible incidents Job loses his oxen, his sheep, his servants, and his sons and daughters. To cap it all, he was afflicted with "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." Job still held fast to his integrity. His wife said to him: "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." But he said to her: "Shall we receive good at the hands of God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips." (2:10).

Then his friends came to visit him: the so-called "Job's comforters". They said - and their arguments and Job's replies take up a number of chapters - "You must have sinned, even unwittingly, for God to punish you like this." Job still claimed innocence, and there are some wonderful, memorable statements of faith in this book. "Even though he slay me, yet will I hope in him." (13:15) "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God." (19:25,26)

And that familiar one often used in a Burial Service: "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower, and withers away; like a fleeting shadow he does not endure." (14:1,2)

After the arguments between Job and his three alleged friends, with Job still puzzled why these things should happen to him, but all the time maintaining his innocence, the Lord answers, and today's passage is the introduction. Four magnificent chapters about God as Creator, Sustainer, and Provider - well worth taking time to read through - chapters 38,39,40 and 41 of the Book of Job.

In the end God restores Job to prosperity and gives him twice as much as before. To the three friends God says: "I am angry with you because you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has ... my servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly." (42:7,8) A browse through the Book of Job when the going gets

rough can be very reassuring - but do remember that the book was written a very long time before Christ.

The anonymous writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews links pre-Christian service of God with Christ's own service. He is writing of course from the point of view of the Hebrew understanding of the priesthood. Aaron was the brother of Moses and when Moses tried to get out of going before Pharaoh to demand the release of the people so that they could go to their Promised Land, God appointed Aaron to go with Moses as spokesman. "You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do." (Ex.4.15)

The other person mentioned in today's Second Reading is Melchizedek (Mel-kiz-edek). It is not at all clear what the writer of Hebrews was getting at by saying that Jesus was a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, except that he saw a mystic connection in the non-traditional calling, and appointment of Jesus to act as a high priest in the offering, not merely of animals as sacrifices to God, but of Himself on behalf of all mankind.

In the Biblical story, Melchizedek suddenly appears, many years before Moses and Aaron, in the days when Abraham was settling in the area we know as Israel, having migrated from Mesopotamia - now Iraq. There was a revolt between several local tribal kings and their overlord, and as the losers fled they carried off some members of Abraham's relatives and their possessions. Abraham successfully led a raid to get them back, and when he returned and I quote, 'Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine. He was a priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abraham, saying: Blessed be Abraham by God Most High, creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.',(Gen.14:18-20) Up until now the whole story of Abraham has been non-ethical and hardly theological. Abraham seems to have regarded God as simply One whose commands refer only to his movements and who he obeys in the hope of reward and favour. Melchizedek's blessing clarifies for the first time who Abraham's deity is, and Abraham goes on from there in faith in this God Most High - the Almighty or Yahweh. But where Melchizedek came from and how he knew about God Most High is a mystery yet to be unfolded. His name crops up again in psalm 110: "*The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek.*"

The psalm was originally written in praise of King David, but the writer of Hebrews has obviously taken it and applied it to Christ, just as in our use of the psalms we understand them as being directed to, or about God, in our worship. The only other references to Melchizedek in the Scriptures are all in the Epistle to the Hebrews, as the author argues that Jesus is a High Priest in the style of Melchizedek - not on the basis of a regulation or heredity, but by God's appointment to be the guarantor of eternal life. And much of the discussion in the Epistle to the Hebrews is arguing that Jesus, High Priest in the style of Melchizedek, has replaced the old order of the Jewish priesthood with all the regulations and laws that went with it.

So we come to the Gospel for today. Having seen how Job recognised that Almighty God is supreme and not to be questioned, and having glimpsed with the author of "Hebrews" how Jesus replaced the old automatic rules-bound religion, we come to the working-out of all this in our own lives, particularly as we read of our Lord's disciples still not understanding fully what they have taken on.

Surely the last thing we want to be said about us is that we are "nobody". Maybe we don't want to be "great", but we do want to make a success of our lives - in the world of our vocation; with bringing up a family; in the eyes of the community. Our Lord does not say this is a bad thing, but there are conditions if we are to do it His way: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." (vv.43,44)

The world would say: "Whoever wants to be great, let him assert himself: man can do anything he wants to do if he wants it badly enough." Our whole society places value on "keeping up with the Joneses", being one up on the neighbours, climbing over our work colleagues, becoming rich, even famous. We may be dishonest or vulgar or immoral, but we must appear well in the eyes of the public.

These disciples who had spent some three years with Jesus still had not learnt the lesson of His humility. In His reply to the selfish and thoughtless request of James and John, Jesus did not speak about their folly, and tick them off. Realizing that they really did not know the significance of the thing they were asking for, He replied in effect: "You do not understand the cost of the places of honour you seek, the suffering that must precede the glory." Jesus asked: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They quickly replied: "Yes we can." They revealed their ignorance when they declared their ability to drink the cup of His suffering - physical and spiritual. Nevertheless James became the first martyr of the apostolic group, and John was the last one of them to lay down his life for Christ.

No wonder the other disciples resented James and John trying to get in early by asking for the chief places in the kingdom! Church rows usually arise from members having a desire to get places of honour or authority, instead of having a desire to serve and to help. Jesus reminded them, and reminds us, that ambition for power over others belongs to the world. True greatness comes through dedicated service to others in His name and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ, self-sacrificing High Priest, has shown us the way.

AMEN

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

A nice short text this morning from today's Gospel: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47)

It was of course the cry of blind Bartimaeus when he heard that Jesus the Healer was going past his begging site on the outskirts of the town of Jericho on the road to Jerusalem. Earlier on in this same 10th chapter of St .Mark's Gospel Jesus had spelt out to the twelve disciples what was in front of Him when they reached Jerusalem: "The Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him; and after three days He will rise." (10:33,34) The last part of the statement they seemed not to have heard - that sort of thing just did not happen, and besides, the awful things which might happen beforehand were all too real and possible. So they would have been very troubled men as they wended their way through the streets of Jericho. To hear their beloved leader addressed as "Son of David" - a title applied only to the expected Messiah - would have undoubtedly brightened their mood, and possibly helped to dispel their alarm. Surely Jesus had been unduly pessimistic! They would be glad to ignore the threatening cloud and to bask in the sunshine of their Master's recognised Messiahship. A day or so later they would again be cheered by the crowds in Jerusalem shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Hosanna" means "Save us we pray!", so it was a repeat of Bartimaeus' cry: "Have mercy, Son of David, Messiah!" Jesus was literally a son or descendant of the great King David by physical relationship through His mother. And He was also Son of David in that all the old prophecies and hopes about the Messiah were fulfilled in Him. But people had come to think of Messiah as a mighty warrior and a conquering king who would subdue the enemies of the Chosen People by military strength. An interpretation which Jesus had firmly rejected and set aside at the very beginning of His ministry. Jesus accepted the title because it was His by right, but He also transcended it. The peace He was to bring was not to be acquired by force of arms, but by love, personal and individual love for every man, woman and child.

We say over and over again, at every service of Holy Communion, that our belief is that "for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human." And we tend to forget how intensely personal this is for each and every one of us. He became truly human for your salvation, and mine. Our system of organised worship requires us to come together as the Family of God, the Body of Christ, Sunday by Sunday, to worship in communion with our God and with each other. This is right, and proper, and necessary. But we must be constantly aware that our God cares for each one of us as an individual. "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered," said Jesus on one occasion, to emphasize how God cares about us, and knows us. Our services of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial should remind us of God's individual caring, for we are baptised by name; confirmed by name; married by name; buried by name. That is one of the great things our new Australian Prayer

Book brings out, whereas the old Book of Common Prayer was so formal that a person's name was only used in baptism and marriage. Perhaps you know that religious song which says:

*"It's me, it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer.
Not my sister, not my brother, but it's me O Lord,
standin' in the need of prayer."*

Although we worship together, and pray for each other, and for the needs of various people, yet it is indeed each one of us as an individual who needs God's grace and comfort as we strive to be His faithful follower. And what better way to approach Him than that of Bartimaeus? "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" For this implies that He is the Christ, the Messiah; that we are not worthy approach Him in our own right.; and that we cannot approach through His own merciful goodness and love. "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy. Surely it is unfortunate that this prayer has been relegated to being an option in the new Prayer Book.

In our service, however, we beseech God a number of times to have mercy upon us. In our private prayers, we do well to pray for mercy before we present our petitions. This is what Bartimaeus did, and Jesus asked him 'What do you want me to do for you?' Bartimaeus replied: "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him: "Go, your faith has made you well." The old King James version of the Bible has this as "your faith hath made thee whole" - I don't know which translation is the more accurate, probably the more recent one, but to be made well suggests merely that his sight was restored. To be made whole suggests complete restoration of body, mind and spirit.

Note too the condition necessary for restoration: the man's faith. How slow we are to realize the conditions under which our Lord grants our prayers! Plenty of times we ask for things to which the answer must be "No!", or perhaps "Have patience a while." But time and time again we go the wrong way about seeking God's help. Too often we demand, like spoilt children, instead of acknowledging our unworthiness: "Lord, have mercy". Too often we do not ask in faith - yet time and time again in the stories of our Lord's healing of people, it is because of their faith, or the faith of someone who brought them to Jesus, that their prayers are granted.

There is another clue to help us along the road to salvation in the story of the healing of Bartimaeus. "They said .to him: Take heart, get up, he is calling you. So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus." Here again the version of Holy Scripture we have before us today varies from the older version - this time for the better! For the King James version says "he rose and came to Jesus." The New Revised Standard Version says he "sprang up" and this speaks of eagerness and enthusiasm - and who wouldn't move that way if it meant healing? That is how we should respond to the call of Jesus - mentally if not physically! Not moaning that "surely I can lie in this Sunday" but with eagerness to seek healing and salvation. Perhaps we do not really recognise that we need Christ's healing and salvation!

The means provided whereby we may obtain the mercies of God are the Sacraments of His Church. Of course, we can say that these are only religious rites and ceremonies, visual aids to help us feel near to God. They are that. But they are much more than that. They are, as the Church Catechism teaches: "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given to us, ordained by Christ Himself, as a means by which we receive that grace, and a pledge to assure us of it."

In other words, the Sacraments are effective channels of grace. Baptism really does mean a new life begun in Christ; Confirmation really is a confirming and strengthening of that new life; Holy Communion really is a sharing in the life and strength of Christ; Absolution really is a forgiveness of sins admitted. To accept the reality of all this we need that same simple faith that Bartimaeus had: to call "Lord, have mercy on me", and then to spring up and seek Him where we know He is to be found - in the Sacraments ordained by Him. Only so will we be healed of that spiritual blindness which is so restricting as we strive to be faithful followers of Christ.

AMEN