

## FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY - YEAR C

7<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 2010

### **Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

In the three Readings appointed in the lectionary for today, we have put before us the calling and the response of three great servants of God: Isaiah, Paul, and Simon Peter. Isaiah describes his vision, in which he saw the tremendous holiness of God: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty"..... The seraphs called to one another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." He was completely overcome by the contrast between the glory of God and his own sinfulness. "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Peter experienced a similar sense of unworthiness and awareness of his sinfulness when confronted by Jesus. "He fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!'" This was not the first time Peter had met Jesus, of course, but it seems to be the culmination of Peter's several encounters. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and John, both fishermen from Capernaum, were disciples of John the Baptist, and according to John in his Gospel, John the Baptist pointed out Jesus to them saying 'Behold the Lamb of God!' The two disciples followed Jesus and spent some hours with Him. Then Andrew went and got his brother, Peter, and took him to meet Jesus, saying "We have found the Messiah.' Presumably, the fishermen returned home, and back to their job, while Jesus went out into the wilderness for His period of fasting and temptation. On His return to civilization, Jesus began His ministry in His home town of Nazareth, where as we heard last Sunday, He was rejected. So He went over to Capernaum, where He was well received, and amongst those whom He healed was Peter's mother-in-law. So it is not really surprising that Jesus used Peter's boat to preach from when the crowd pressed in on Him.

On top of all the other experiences with Jesus, now there comes that great catch of fish. It is about the last straw for Peter, and he fell to his knees in awareness of the holiness of Jesus, and by contrast, his own sinfulness.

The story of Paul's confrontation and conversion is recorded by St .Luke in Acts of the Apostles, chapter 9. As he touches on his call in the letter to the Corinthians he does not actually spell out clearly that his reaction to the appearance of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus had the same effect on him as the vision of Isaiah or the physical presence of Jesus with Peter. Nevertheless it is obvious that the same awareness of sinfulness and unworthiness was there. He wrote, as we heard: "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

In each of these three cases - the call to service of Isaiah, Peter, and Paul - there is present a sense of utter unworthiness, and awareness of imperfection. In each case this is overcome by a gracious act of God of forgiveness and grace, leading on to a commissioning for a special role in the Church of God. In Isaiah's vision one of the seraphs touched a live coal to his lips - a symbol of purification. "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." And then the acceptance of his call: Here am I: send me!"

Jesus said to Peter: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." And they left everything and followed Him. Paul wrote: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain." Many people, brought up in respectable homes, living decent lives, fail to realize that although they may keep the laws of the land; although they might never get themselves talked about in shocked whispers: yet their lives are never free from that imperfection and taint we call sin. Feeling that, by and large, they live good lives, such people tend to excuse themselves from going to church - regularly anyway - because they do not see themselves as any worse than those who do. And, behaviour alone considered, this may well be so. Now, you and I know that morals and behaviour are a result, not a cause of godliness. Christian behaviour springs from a desire to be more like the Christ whom we worship. It so happens that accepted norms of behaviour in our society were once modelled on Christ's standard - you cannot reverse the scheme and say because I act according to that standard I am a Christian. That is like saying: 'The roof of the house is wet therefore it is raining' - it's not necessarily so, although the reverse is true: "It is raining, therefore the roof of the house is wet." People who feel they are O.K. with God because their moral behaviour is O.K., are gravely misled.

At the other end of the scale are those who feel that they are not good enough to come to church, that it's not for them. It might be that they were given that impression by churchgoers – an unfortunate thing which does happen now and then, even inadvertently. Their social situation doesn't fit in, they think; their clothes aren't nice enough; they can't contribute much financially, they think. And so on. This is no exaggeration. There are people who have an inferiority complex about churchgoing. Or it may be that some exclude themselves because they once made some mistake, some error of judgment, some kind of sin for which they cannot forgive themselves, and so cannot imagine God forgiving them either. They are of course, quite wrong: no sin is too great for God to forgive, provided our repentance for it is sincere and genuine. But we are not in those categories, are we, for we do come to church and worship and acknowledge that we have shortcomings, and try to live good lives. Be careful! We must not get smug and self-satisfied. The worst sins of all are those to which we are tempted: selfishness, pride, bad temper, unkindness, jealousy, intemperance - and they are just as hateful in God's sight as the more spectacular ones which society condemns. There is the very real danger of thinking we're O.K. because we come to church and worship and try to live moral lives. We might not stop to remember that it was for our sins too that Christ died, for we might have our sense of unworthiness dulled because we feel no serious awareness of sin.

As we come to worship Sunday by Sunday, we should come with a sense of our own unworthiness; come to face and acknowledge our sinfulness; come to receive and to accept our Lord's forgiveness; come to receive through the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ spiritual renewal and strengthening to be more truly His people.

Isaiah the nobleman, Paul the scholar, Peter the fisherman, were each overwhelmed by the awareness of their sinfulness when confronted by the glory of God. Each accepted the forgiveness offered in mercy and love. And each went on to fulfill the vocation to which he had been called.

May we too know that mercy and love, and give ourselves freely to the service of our Heavenly Father.

**AMEN**

## SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY - YEAR C

14<sup>th</sup> February, 2010

### **Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

Two verses from the Old Testament Reading, which interpret the real meaning of what St. Luke's record of the Beatitudes is saying: "Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. .... Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." (Jer.17:5 & 7)

On the face of it, Luke has Jesus saying that it is a good thing to be poor, hungry, sad, and hated; and a bad thing to be rich, well fed, happy, and popular. We know from St. Matthew's version of the Beatitudes that that was certainly not what Jesus meant. "Blessed are the poor - in spirit; blessed are those who hunger - for righteousness; blessed are those who are persecuted - for righteousness' sake." (Matt.5:3) And this tells us that Jesus was not pronouncing a general benediction upon misfortune, as though poverty, hunger, grief, and being resented were in themselves guarantees of eternal bliss. Nor was He saying that possession of wealth, health, and popularity are in themselves guarantees of eternal damnation. However, when you ask the average person what is the recipe for happiness, the answer is always "prosperity, comfort, peace of mind, popularity." Advertisements on the telly for the Lotteries depend on it: "I want to break free!"

Jesus pronounced His blessing on those who realize that these are worldly, temporary things which cannot give full and eternal satisfaction. It is the hungry person at a banquet who is more blessed than one who is well-fed. In approaching the Kingdom of God, the advantage belongs to those who are in the greatest need and who have the greatest capacity for its blessings, and who are not distracted by the superficial consolations of the world.

In a number of places in the Gospels Jesus warned those with possessions, because possessions can provide distractions and a misleading sense of security. But it does not necessarily follow that just because a poor person does not have those distractions or sense of security that he has a greater chance of eternal bliss - his distractions are perhaps even more pressing, like where is his next meal coming from; how will he pay last week's rent, never mind this week's; how can he provide clothing for his children. To get at our Lord's full meaning in the Beatitudes, we must take both Matthew's and Luke's versions together. Neither Mark nor John recorded these sayings of Jesus.

In Matthew's version the promises are not to the physically poor and hungry, but to those who have a sense of spiritual need and a hunger for the vindication of God's cause. But from this we might suppose that Jesus was setting a moral and ethical standard for entry into the Kingdom, and that men and women have to earn their blessedness by being poor, humble, merciful, and pure of heart. Luke's simpler version guards against this misinterpretation. The one thing that Jesus requires in His disciples is an awareness of the emptiness that God alone can fill, a discontent with the world, which will lead them to the wealth, the satisfaction, the consolation, the brotherliness of the Kingdom. "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy", said Jesus, "for surely your reward is great in heaven." It is not mercenary to expect reward. There is a kind of

reward which is the enjoyment of the results of our labour and conduct. One youngster does his piano practice because his parents bribe or threaten him. Another does it because he wants to enjoy creating music. One person makes friends because they will be useful; another because friendship is something enjoyable. The joys of the Kingdom of God are the result of becoming a certain sort of person, one who will enjoy being forever with God because he has already found in God great reward and satisfaction, which the world cannot supply. The Season of Lent begins in a couple of week's time and runs for a period of nearly six weeks during which the Church calls us to examine ourselves and our way of life, and discipline ourselves in order that we might more readily come to acknowledge our dependence upon God, and to loosen our dependence upon the things of this world.

Like many religious customs and practices, the strict observance of Lent has tended to fall into disuse. For so long we have joked about giving up sugar in our tea and not eating cake and keeping meat off the menu on Fridays, that in rejecting these superficial outward exercises as being merely a change in diet, we have also lost the ideal of self-discipline. That was where the value lay - in the self-control. We are basically self-indulgent, and by joking off the traditional abstinence we are free to continue to indulge in our little luxuries. It is easier not to bother. But even looked on from a merely dietary point of view, there is merit - we eat too many sugary things and too many carbohydrates anyway. A deliberate exercise of mastery for the six weeks of Lent over our use of alcohol, sugar, nicotine or whatever, helps to prevent them from becoming our masters. If they are already our masters - as chocolates and other goodies may be - then all the more reason for an attempt at control.

But Lent is not just a time for control over our diet. Control over our use of time is important, and should be practiced at this time.. So why not exercise a greater degree of control of the use of spare time in this period? Be more willing to tackle those tasks which are so easily postponed; make a point of more regular\* attendance at public worship; spend more time in prayer and the reading of Holy Scripture; visit those shut-in people you say you should go to; allocate money normally spent on luxuries to the Lenten Missionary Appeal.

We live in a basically non-religious community. Christian families are constantly under the tension of balancing their Christian priorities with the demands of a non-Christian community life style. Too bad for the Christian who wants to play sport and finds practice and matches scheduled for Sunday mornings. Too bad for the Christian who would like to participate in some weekend educational course. If you put your worship first you will probably miss out on these other things - there are enough people about who don't mind not worshipping for the show to go on.

If you are to be a devout and faithful Christian today, it is going to cost you. You will need to be strong and self-disciplined, alert to the temptations, and seeking the power of the Holy Spirit to withstand those pressures. Only if we have our own desires, ambitions, tastes, and interests under firm and proper control will we be able to put the worship and service of Christ first on our list of priorities. Blessed are they who know their need, and the source of their strength.

**AMEN**

## **FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT - Year C Responsibility: Canon Barlow 21<sup>st</sup> February 2010**

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." (Luke 4:1 & 2)

Jesus came to His time of testing immediately after the deeply moving experience of His baptism. That must have been a tremendous and awe inspiring moment when, as-Matthew records: "The heavens were opened and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him, and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt.3:16,17) And then, immediately, Jesus went off alone into that grim barren wasteland which lies to the west of Jericho and the River Jordan. That seems an odd thing to do, at first sight. One might have thought that with a ministry to begin, and so little time to do it in, Jesus would have been anxious to start in straight away and get on with it. Instead, He went away by Himself for over a month to think and pray in solitude. There He worked out His priorities and His methods, His mission and above all, His own self. Hence the wording of two of the temptations, as both Matthew and Luke record: "If you are the Son of God .... " Note that "If". The Father had said, at His baptism: "This is my beloved Son." Satan asked the question: "Are you? If so, prove it!" The temptation here was two-fold: first to doubt His divine Sonship, to prove it before He stood up in public and made a fool of Himself, which He would if He was mistaken. And secondly, to demonstrate His power in the wrong way by appealing to the merely human concerns of the people - their physical hunger, their awe in response to a miracle, their likelihood to give their loyalty to Him if He had riches and power. Bread and circuses have always been used by politicians and power seekers to win popularity.

Those were times of economic hardship and heavy taxation. Many people were desperately poor. They would gladly follow anyone who provided them with food. To turn stones into bread - and the flat round stones of the desert looked like home-made bread - would bring a ready response. The very compassion of Jesus would lead Him to consider this policy. Surely, it could be argued, when the physical needs were met they would be more ready to hear the Gospel! This has a ring of some political arguments of today - if only we could have a true welfare State, with benefits available for all, people would be happier and crime would diminish. The real answer which Jesus knew 'and which we are terribly slow to learn, is that man does not live solely on physical gratification. The truth and reality of God, and obedience to His laws are the necessities for full and real life. Jesus was concerned of course about the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and so on, and so must the Church be, in every age. Christianity must demonstrate a total Gospel, concerned with the whole human situation. But life means more than the circumstances of man's environment. It has to get down to the roots of man's failure to make the best use of that environment. Salvation is about the whole person in the whole world. The spiritual is as much a part of that world as is the material.

Then, according to St. Luke, came the temptation to use power and wealth to obtain followers. A child at school who is provided with more pocket-money than is good for him, is very popular while he is a big spender. The parable of the Prodigal Son has that young waster popular while he had money to throw around - when it ran out his so-called friends did not want to know him, and couldn't or wouldn't even provide him with a job. We all know about the sportsman or politician who falls from- grace - he soon discovers who his real friends are, whereas previously plenty of people sought to be recognised by him and to be admitted into the inner circle.

In Palestine at the time of Jesus a really effective rebellion could have liberated the country from the Romans, and it might even have gone on to become a dominating power itself. It had happened before and has since. And the people were looking for that kind of leader, or Messiah. It was no idle or wishful thinking on Jesus' part to muse about what power and wealth could achieve. Moreover it was a real alternative to the way of persecution and suffering which Jesus could see lay ahead for Himself and for His followers, His Church. But He rejected the way of force and compulsion. It was for Him and is for all, wrong to use evil methods to achieve right ends, however good the cause, however great the suffering it might avoid.

In parables like the one about the Sower and the various types of ground on which his seed fell, Jesus showed that He clearly understood "sales resistance" to the truth. So as He faced His ministry, He - would see the possibility of shocking people into awareness of His power over material things, and thereby attracting people to hear His teaching and His message, by performing awe-inspiring acts. "Throw yourself off the spire of the temple" said Satan, "and when you walk away unharmed, people will know you are the Son of God." And he even quoted Scripture to prove his point. Or rather took a Scriptural quotation out of context for his purpose! Psalm 91 verses 11 and 12 as a matter of fact. The people longed for signs that God still cared and that God could still act in His world. They would surely respond to miracles!

But what would be the depth of that response? Later on Jesus deliberately avoided publicity for His works of healing. He knew that the results would be superficial and that people would swarm to be healed but not to listen and be converted. True faith is that which has been tested and tried in the good times and in the bad, and yet has survived. So what do our Lord's temptations say to us today, as we begin another reflective Season of Lent? Well for one thing, if Jesus, the holy Son of God, was tempted by Satan, we ourselves can hardly expect to be exempt as we try to follow our Lord and Saviour. Temptation is a fact of life, common to all mankind, and we must learn to face it, to recognise it for what it is, and reject it. "It is written," said Jesus, and indeed in Holy Scripture we may find inspiration and guidance when faced by temptation. Then, as we learn that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit after His baptism, and led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and still had to face temptation, we know that to be filled with the Spirit does not mean that we will be free from temptation. In fact the opposite is likely to be the case. But it is in the power of the Spirit that we too, like our Lord, are able to overcome temptation - not in our own strength, but in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was tempted to compromise over a matter of principle: it was not that the result would be wrong, but the method of achieving it would be a misuse of His power and authority. And we are tempted similarly, to compromise over matters of principle. We fear criticism by people for being narrow-minded, when it is really them being narrow-minded and refusing to face the wider implications of some dubious line of action. Yet if we do compromise, we disappoint our critics who unconsciously expect from us a positive witness to something they secretly envy us having: our faith.

"The word is near you," wrote St. Paul, "on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.' **Amen**

## SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR C

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2010**

"I tell you, No, but unless you repent you too will all perish." (Luke 13:3 & 5)

Two examples, two identical warnings. An interesting repetition for the sake of emphasis. Jesus uses some then-recent altercation between the Jews from Galilee and the Roman authorities which ended in a massacre, and another recent tragedy when a building collapsed in Siloam and killed several people, to explode the old theory arising from Old Testament teaching, that suffering and death are punishments for sin. He does not offer any explanation as to why such tragedies happen, but He does urge that disasters like these should serve as warnings to us to put ourselves right with God. We too might someday meet unexpected disaster.

The massacre can readily be understood - we see on T.V. that happening every day in Jerusalem in the clashes between Jews and Arabs. Only this time it is between the Jews and the Roman soldiers. It is pretty obvious that if someone deliberately goes out to defy armed authority he is likely to be hurt. Unfortunately there are always innocent people who get caught in the middle. To that we can only say: "Bad luck!"

It is much more difficult to understand the reason why, when, as in the illustration, a building collapses and kills bystanders. We had an unfortunate incident in this country a few years ago, when a child was killed by flying masonry as a hospital building was being demolished by explosives. No doubt the parents of that kiddie are still asking "Why?" And even if they are awarded lots of money in recompense, and if the men are proved to have been lacking in care and are gaoled, or fined, their question is still not answered.

Jesus said: "Do you think these people who suffered and died were worse sinners than all the rest?" Was that child *selected* to be hit by a brick from the explosion? She was hardly the great sinner the Old Testament preachers claimed would receive special retribution! Jesus did not offer an explanation, but by logic and reason and with an understanding of God's way and a knowledge that God is love, we cannot say "It is the will of God", and fold our hands meekly. True, some people often do so in an attempt to come to terms with their grief.

It does seem a bit easy just to say "Bad luck, you were in the wrong place at the wrong time." Yet that does seem to be the only solution at times. At other times it may be as the result of human error - lack of judgement, inattention, carelessness.

Human independence has something to do with this. When God created this world, we believe that because He is perfect so His creation was originally perfect. In the creation of perfect human beings there had to be a real freedom for them, otherwise they would be merely robots. They had to be free to choose godliness: it could not be in-built, otherwise it would be worthless. And this implied the possibility that they might choose to reject godliness, or at least water it down, dilute it. Much, if not all of the desecration of the

perfection of creation can be traced to the actions of human beings who have fallen away from perfection, indulging in greed, and selfish ambition.

Because we each have this freedom, we are able not only to be selfish and grasping, but we can also choose to be high-minded and generous, even able to move back towards godliness. We can also choose to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, just because we perhaps decide to walk down this street instead of that.

There is another factor, not so much to do with our decision to go here or there, but more to do with matters of behaviour and morality. That is the availability of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We make many decisions throughout the day. Rarely do we pause to enquire of the Holy Spirit which way to go, and of course it is silly to think of asking about the majority of our decisions: shall I put vegemite or jam on my bread? Shall I cross the street here or down further? God surely expects us to make those kind of decisions; after all that is what He gave us minds for. But there are from time to time bigger issues which are not so easily solved so as to be a wise and proper decision. That is where we are wise to place it before the Holy Spirit. Not that we are likely to get the answer spelt out like an E-mail letter on a computer, or even as a voice in our minds. That can happen of course, but mostly the answer comes as a feeling of sureness, the right thing to do, the best course of action to follow. And the more we become accustomed to "tuning-in" to the Holy Spirit, the more clearly we will get the message. If we do not seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our decision making, we are bound to make serious mistakes, even if we do get some things right.

At the end of each of His two examples, Jesus said: "But unless you repent, you too will all perish." We should take that as a personal hint to get ourselves right with God, for repentance means turning around and going in the other direction, the right direction.

But Jesus was addressing a wider issue, also. He had premonitions of disaster heading for the People of Israel; He was able to interpret the signs of the times. As Messiah He had called Israel to reconsider how it had fallen from its vocation as the People of God, and to repent of the current national pride which had understood that vocation in terms of privilege and worldly greatness. To reject the Way of Jesus was to choose a path leading directly to conflict with Rome and subsequent catastrophe. In the mounting hostility to His own mission, in the strained relationships between Jews and Gentiles, in the frequent outbursts of patriotic, anti-Roman riots, and in the growing severity with which these outbursts were put down, Jesus read the signs of the times, which He believed should be apparent to all. As in the time of Isaiah God had used Assyria as the rod of His anger, so now He was about to use Rome as the agent of His judgement upon His disobedient people, and only immediate repentance could save them. They did not repent, and Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70AD.

Those victims of tragedy, whether due to the vindictive severity of Pilate, or to an unforeseen accident, must not be regarded as outstanding sinners specially singled out for divine retribution, but they provide an analogy for Jesus to give a salutary warning that the whole nation was heading for disaster. Like the unfruitful fig tree which is given one last chance to respond to special treatment, Israel must use the respite God has given in His mercy, to bring about a national reformation, or find that there is a limit to the Divine forbearance. We too must get the message. Yet again we are reminded by the whole theme of the

Season of Lent: "Rend your heart, and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He **is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**' (Joel 2:13) **AMEN**