

Sentence

They cried out in fear, but Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.'

Matthew 14:26

Collect

Grant to us, Lord, we beseech You, the spirit to think and do always such things as are right: that we, who cannot do anything that is good without You, may be enabled to live according to Your will, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Genesis 37:1-4 & 12 – 28

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. This is the account of Jacob. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them." "Very well," he replied. So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron. When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?" He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?" "They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

"Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed. So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

This is the Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

Psalm

105:1-6 & 16-22

O give thanks to the Lord and call upon His Name: tell among the peoples what things He has done
Sing to Him, O sing praises: and be telling of all His marvellous works
Exult in His holy Name: and let those who seek the Lord be joyful in heart
Seek the Lord and His strength: O seek His face continually
Call to mind what wonders He has done: His marvellous acts and the judgements of His mouth
O Seed of Abraham His servant: O children of Jacob, His chosen one

Then He called down a famine on the land: and destroyed the bread that was their stay
But He also sent a man ahead of them: Joseph who was sold into slavery
Whose feet they fastened with fetters: and thrust his neck into a hoop of iron
Till the time that his words proved true: he was tested by the Lord's command
Then the king sent and loosed him: the ruler of nations set him free
He made him master of his household and ruler over all his possessions
To rebuke his officers at will: and to teach his counselors wisdom

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: “The man who does these things will live by them.” But the righteousness that is by faith says: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

This is the Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

GOSPEL

Matthew 14:22 – 36

Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.” “Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to him and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord
Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Year A always strikes me as being a reminder year, getting us to look again at the old Testament stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I guess it is a bit like rowing: you do best when you face the rear, using the spot where you have come from as a guide to steer to where you are going. (Mind you, it is a long, long time since I last rowed a boat – I may have been 16 or 17.) Mind you, I never understood the point of History lessons at School, until it hit me that I do not know who I am until I know from whence I have come. That has as much to do with family traits as it has to do with ‘history.’

This familiar story about Joseph should remind us of a thing or two when it comes both to the wider aspects of the Faith and our own experience of it. It has to be said that Joseph grew up being a spoiled brat in that rather large family, and being youngest (or almost) would have heightened the tension. Jacob spoiled him with that beautiful coat, and it would seem that Joseph grew up being the one who expected attention. The resultant revolt by the brothers could hardly be unexpected.

However, it is the outcome of the story that I emphasize: through what must have been a hideous experience of slavery, of miscarriage of justice, and almost total dismay, Joseph became an important person in the land *because he became a servant of all*. Through all the trials and tribulations, God seems to have had Joseph in His hands, and through him both Egypt and his wider family were rescued from famine.

It bodes us well, seems to me, when passing through difficult times, to stop and see that the hand of the Father may well be right there in the middle of it all, with a bigger picture view of things. I guess what is important

to see is that, even here in the OT period long before Christ, God was ever the God of resurrection, bringing the best of life out of the harshest of difficulty. *And He still does it.*

Psalm

As is often the case, the Psalm reflects something of the OT Lesson. Not only for us but also for ancient Israel, the Psalms were designed to bring people's minds back to the history of the Lord Who 'does great things for us' – another recall to history to enable better living in the present.

Epistle

I well recall a lovely single lady at one of the congregations in a parish where I worked, who always had great difficulty reading the Epistle for the day, especially when it was a Pauline Epistle. She was convinced that Paul was a misogynist, and very narrow-minded. On top of that, he was so often pedantic and wordy.

I can just see her lips tighten as she got up to read this passage, with a *sub voce* comment as she returned to her place. 'What ever is Paul on about here?' And you may feel the same unless you are a fan of the Apostle's.

A word of warning. *Christ is the end of the law* Paul writes, and it is MOST important to note that whenever in the NT you have the word 'end' in English to ask someone to refer to their Greek NT. Almost invariably the word behind 'end' is *τελος* - *telos*. And *telos* does not mean end, full stop, but **goal**. Where things are headed.

This may not make a lot of difference to you but it certainly does to what Paul is trying to convey. Put into this context what we have been thinking about Joseph and perhaps you get a clearer picture.

So in the passage that follows, Paul is not so much providing some sort of doctrinal statement but moiré an atmospheric one, if you follow me. Paul is not calling for the right theology, but for the right motive for living and operating. When I see Jesus is Lord, then – apart from anything else, - I see that **I am NOT**. Then I am more likely to relate to other people not as some sort of controller but rather as a brother, a fellow-disciple.

In other words, Paul is underlining the necessity for the Christian to operate Christianly, for out of that will come the preaching by life as well as by word, and other people will come to understand the nature of the Gospel and of the Father. On that basis people can make their own choice to follow or to refrain from following.

GOSPEL

It is worthwhile to compare the different Evangelists' relating of this story, for each of them has a slightly different emphasis. Once again, it is helpful to have a solid knowledge of Scripture, for those present at the time needed that to catch sight of what was being said.

Have a look at the Psalms towards the end of the Psalter, and see such things as in Psalm 148. There the Psalmist rejoices in seeing that God is Lord of the elements – rather than there being a plethora of gods and goddesses involved in controlling such things. However the real point for the disciples lay in the fact that here was Someone 'Whom even wind and sea obey!' and there can be but one answer to that poser.

Notice how Jesus always seemed to expect people to **think** about what was happening. There was no direct statement (*do you get it? Do you get it?')* In other words, faced with issues or threats beyond their capacity to handle, there was the reassurance that He Who is Creator is right there in the middle of the problem.

The traditional view of why these incidents were included in the Gospels runs along the lines that the Gospels were written at a time when the Church seemed threatened and overwhelmed by events around them, especially the threats from Empire and contrary opinion. There is nothing in life that can separate us from the love of God, as Paul expressed it in his letter to the Romans.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is possibly as good a time as ever to take a look at these readings in the light of something that seems to have bothered the people of the Church for a number of decades recently. As they watch the 'greying of the Church,' there is the persistent wonder and tension as to whether the Church and Faith will outlive us who are getting on. It is something that has bothered the minds and hearts of lots of people, and all manner of programmes and plans and processes have been offered to meet the threat or the challenge.

Now, I have no doubt at all that the Christian Church needs to get its act together and do a constant rethink. But after 40 years or more in the priesthood, and incalculable numbers of programmes designed to solve the problem, I have long gone past the situation of believing that this programme or that is going to answer the issues. In 1963 it was the Parish Life Programme, which raised awareness somewhat – for some. In more recent times it has been the Alpha Course, which strikes me as useful but somewhat limited. And the never-ending list of this programme and that leaves the People of God so caught up in conferences that no time is left for **BEING the Church of God.**

One of the factors that, seems to my small mind¹ to be missing from many people's assessments and thoughts, is that there is little in the way of a look back into history. If there was one thing that Israel seemed to do constantly, or at least its prophets did, was to look back to see what God had been doing in the past, catch sight of the direction that Yahweh was heading, and then to get into step with Him.

First of all, we possibly need reminding that this is God's Church, not ours, and this is a difficult concept to grasp. Well, not difficult theoretically, but hard practically. If we do not do something, then all goes bust. Oh! Yeah!

But look back over Biblical history, and be reminded from Joseph on, if we go no further back than that, that right in the middle of all Joseph's nasty experiences, God was a step or more ahead of the process, preparing for something that no mere mortal had even begun to guess at. (I find it very strange, in the light of the Biblical story, that people still operate under the premise that God is only interested in lovely, soft, beautiful things. Little could be further from the truth, and it needs to be distant from reality for life can be quite something of a #\$\$%^& from time to time. However, out of the Joseph experience came something that becomes a regular pattern as the centuries roll on: God is a God Who rescues His people, using His people.

¹ And for heaven's sake, feel free to disagree, even in large limbs!

Sentence

Thus says the Lord, "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon My salvation will come and My deliverance be revealed."
Isaiah 56:1

Collect

Almighty God, You have given Your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life: give us grace that we may always thankfully receive the benefits of His sacrifice, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of His most holy life, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.' You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. Tell my father about all the honour accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly."

Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

This is the Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

PSALM

133

Behold how good and lovely it is: when families live together in unity
It is fragrant as oil upon the head:, that runs down to the beard: fragrant as oil upon the beard of Aaron, that ran down over the collar of his robe
It is like the dew of Hermon: like the dew that falls upon the hill of Zion.
For there the Lord commanded His blessing: which is life for evermore.

EPISTLE

Romans 11:13-32

Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "*Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*"

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

This is the Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

GOSPEL

Matthew 15: 21 – 28

Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ

Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not

make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth is what makes him 'unclean.'" Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

Peter said, "Explain the parable to us." "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'"

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

This is the Gospel of the Lord Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

There is a depth of passion in today's reading, where Joseph reveals himself to his errant brothers, who have a shattering shock to their system. It is a fascinating insight into the nature of Joseph, who must have pondered the possibility of re-encountering his brothers as he rose to prominence in Egypt.

What is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this cameo is the extent to which the wronged Joseph could forgive the ghastly misdeeds of his brothers, having stopped to see that, behind it all, lay the hand of God. One of the things that a previous Bishop of mine often used to draw our attention to was the capacity of God to work even through human evil to bring about His own designs. The Cross is the example, *par excellence*, of that.

Psalm

One really does have to say that this is a twee little Psalm, does not one! The concept of unity, in family or anywhere is very useful and beneficial, even if rather too rare. However the connection between unity and fragrant oil escapes me.

Mind you, I remember the priest who was my mentor when I was first ordained, after a service one evening, called me over, put his Prayer Book down on the Vestry desk, and laid his finger on that prayer which mentioned 'the continual dew of Your blessing.' "Ron," he said to me, "I have been reading Evening Prayer for 45 years and look at what has just hit me!" The imagery of dew, almost imperceptible but hugely refreshing, had hit that man who was ever on the lookout to find what the words of the BCP might open up to him from time to time.

Epistle

It may describe me more than the times in which I grew up as a Christian, but I can say that the only approach to readings such as today's Epistle was underlined to me by my 'elders and betters,' exclusively in terms of 'keeping myself pure.' Certainly, I have never had the urge to get drunk, pouring scorn on those who declared that they had had a tremendous party – 'I cannot remember a thing about it!'

So much of the challenge in the New Testament to stay away from destructive stuff lies not in the perceived need for purity as much as it has to do with providing a better environment for those around you. If I make a mess, it is not only of me, but also of those nearest and dearest. Sin is bad because of the damage it wreaks. And that is the real point of avoiding it as much as possible.

GOSPEL

Perhaps because very few of us have had much to do with a religion of taboos and of rituals, it is hard to be impressed by those religions that do focus on such things. For a great deal of its life and existence, Judaism had a lot to do with ritual responses to various perceived crises in life, and such things as ritual purification took a leading part in what was considered the practice of the faithful. As a consequence, the source of problems tended to be seen

in terms of failure to observe the rituals, when the real problems emerged much closer to a person's attitude and behaviour. (These days, the means of avoiding personal responsibility tends to be seen in terms of genetic make-up (I am not responsible for my genes!) or upbringing, or peer pressures and suchlike.

However, Jesus was quite firm and unyielding: sin comes from inside me, not from what I eat or refrain from eating. Sin does not come from my genes either – it is far more self-driven than that!

I am not sure why the cameo about the Canaanitish woman has been added to today's Gospel, except perhaps, in the light of what is above, this lady who could well have pleaded total ignorance of the important matters of faith and religion shows herself to be quite well-informed, thank you very much. It does not do the modern Christian a lot of good to consider people outside the Church to be ignorant of the spiritual realities. Quite often they are more aware than the Christian! It is a challenging thought!

Sentence

Jesus asked them, 'Who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!'

Matthew 16:15-6

Collect

Creator God, You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You: teach us to offer ourselves in Your service that here we may have Your peace, and in the world to come, may see Your face to face, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

A new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country." So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with hard labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live." Now a man of the house of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the river bank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to get it. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said. Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" "Yes, go," she answered. And the girl went and got the baby's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

This is the Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

PSALM

124

If the Lord has not been on our side, now may Israel say: if the Lord had not been on our side, when our enemies rose against us

Then they would have swallowed us alive: when their anger was kindled against us.

Then the waters would have overwhelmed us and the torrents gone over us: the raging waters would have gone clean over us

But praised be the Lord: Who has not given us as a prey to their teeth

We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler: the snare is broken and we have gone free

Our help is in the Name of the Lord: Who has made heaven and earth

EPISTLE

Romans 12: 1 – 8

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought,

but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a person's gift is prophesying, use it in proportion to their faith. If it is serving, in service; if it is teaching, teach; if it is encouraging, encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, give generously; if it is leadership, govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, do it cheerfully.

This is the Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

GOSPEL

Matthew 16: 13 – 20

Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

This is the Gospel of the Lord Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Old Testament

This must surely be one of the best-known stories in the Old Testament, being as it is the introduction to the rescue of Israel from the hands of the Egyptians. It is an interesting measure of the loyalty of the Hebrew midwives, and of the womenfolk generally, for just ponder a moment and realize the extent of their involvement in the saga. No bravery from the women; no future for Israel. *Seems to me that there are echoes here we may not be keen on hearing!*

One of the Biblical emphases that many people miss may be worth regurgitating here. It will require the moving past the sheer remembering of the Exodus saga, to ponder something of the whys and wherefores. One of the factors that Israel celebrated often is that business of seeing, all over again, the work of a Lord Who rescues His people right at the point where they seem bound for (self-) destruction. Just when all hope seems to have disappeared, God works. God is a rescuing God.

The other matter that requires attention is that God never rescues without the involvement of people who see what the problem is, and who get stuck into the issues, regardless of contrary pressure. See this aspect of life in terms of the Exodus, the Exile, the Christ event, and – here is the point of it all – the here and now. I have more than a sneaky suspicion that the happ-clappy part of the Church which makes a lot of noise about having no recession is little more than a last gasp at keeping a show going. The Church is going through (what it so often needs to go through) a period of drought and even self-despair. Look at history and see that whenever the Church has been 'strong,' the reality is quite the opposite because it is precisely there that the Church loses its way. *When we are weak, then we are strong* is the Biblical measure, because only then are we ready to see that this is the Lord's Church, not ours, and we need to be open to Him.

Psalm

And is that not what the Psalm is saying?

Epistle

This is one of the most profound passages – in my opinion – in Paul's Letter to the Romans; while it has been taken as a strong basis for devotional living, it should in fact be the basis for down-to-earth living in a world that turns its back in life, truth, integrity and God. Not only does this passage underline the direction that the Gospel takes us, but it also underlines the reasons why. To live selfishly is to destroy almost everything your hands touch; to live this way, as servant like the Servant Lord, is to find like at its most significant. This passage is well worth reading through and pondering, several times at one sitting!

GOSPEL

One aspect of the Gospel record of Jesus' ministry that tends to be overlooked because it is unexpected, is the fact that -as time passed - Jesus was in a position where He had to 'lean on' the disciples to get them to catch sight of the importance of what was happening. Like almost any congregation, at least those that I have known, there is a point where the comfort zone has to be left behind because there is far more to be done.

This is why we have here the pressure put on the Twelve to examine and dissect what was going on in the Ministry of Jesus. 'Who do people say that I am?' There was never any doubt in Jesus' mind, but if the disciples did not catch on and get into step, it would take till Doomsday for any progress to be made.

It seems to me that rather too much emphasis has been placed on Peter's recognition of Jesus as Messiah. The real issue is that Peter (and the others) had to be pushed even to begin to *think* about what was going on. And while Simon was re-named as the rock of the group, this surely had to be a case of using language of hope! With all due respect it has to be noted that it took quite some time after all this before Peter really began to live up to his name. Before you turn off such a thought, it is presented to you as encouragement, actually. If the Lord operated so with Peter and the Twelve, then one can safely assume a similar patience with you and me. However, the need to grow and develop remains an imperative for the believer. There is nothing static about being Christian.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

I can offer you two rather different illustrations to underline the direction I would ask you to think this Sunday as we ponder that very familiar incident of Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah.

It is almost half a century ago now, but in first year of theological studies, one set of lectures focussed on Genesis. The studies were led by a very capable gent, but in the situation where I was trained, they went in a direction quite unfamiliar for most of us and threatening for some. In a not-all -that-gentle way, Bruce Leslie Smith opened the series of lectures on the Creation Story by removing the possibility of seeing these old sagas in a literal way. However, once he completed the demolition process, the rebuilding began and none of us could ever see the Creation sagas in the old way again. In fact, the stunning outcome of those lectures was to understand the tales in a new way, that led to us seeing life, the world, God and ourselves in a remarkable new light.

That is not quite true. One of the men was so threatened that he removed himself from the lectures. So he stayed stuck in his rather narrow fundamentalist track. What is worse is that I met the man again about 25 years later, and he had still remained true to his narrow vision, *and had moved nowhere in his Christian pilgrimage.*

The second tale is almost against myself.

Fresh out into a parish in the Outback, the clergy and leading lay folk of the Diocese had gathered at a 'Parish Life Conference' led by a man who later became a Bishop in NZ. Although I have long been more than a little cynical of movements that presume to have all the answers, this one blew up in my head.

The question was asked of all of us: 'Where is your parish going?' or words to that effect. My immediate answer to that question was that parishes go no where. They just are. And then as the idea reverberated around my head, I was made to realize that if someone or something is not moving forward, it is going nowhere, it is going backwards. In other words, life and faith is all about moving, growing, exploring and considering the implications of what one believes and understands. It is a reach towards maturity.

That thought. So stunning then, seemed to run against all that had previously been held so dear. One of the things so close to the fundamentalist heart is that nothing changes about the Faith, 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever.' All that was epitomized by a certain Archbishop of the time whose literary efforts were tied up with reliving the Reformation of the 16th Century.

Faith is never a matter of looking back over one's shoulder and trying to recreate some sort of Camelot! It is never about trying to make the present fit the past. It is about trying to respond to life and people here and now, and to see where the Faith makes a significant and positive contribution.

And there is an enormous field to cover in just that direction let alone all sorts of others.

Sentence

If you would become a disciple of Jesus, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him.

Matthew 16: 24

Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things, grat in our hearts the love of Your Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of Your great mercy, keep us in the same, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Exodus 3:1 – 15

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation."

This is the Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

PSALM

105:1-6 & 23 – 26

O give thanks to the Lord and call upon His name: tell among the people what things He has done
Sing to Him, O sing praises: and be telling of all His marvellous works
Extol His holy Name: and let those who seek the Lord be joyful in heart
Seek the Lord and His strength: O seek His face continually
Call to mind what wonders He has done: His marvellous acts and the judgements of His mouth
O seed of Abraham His servant: O children of Jacob, His chosen one

Then Israel came into Egypt: and Jacob dwelt in the land of Ham.
There the Lord made His people fruitful: too numerous for their enemies,
Whose heart He turned to hate His people: and to deal deceitfully with His servants

EPISTLE

Romans 12: 9 – 21

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible,

as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "*It is mine to avenge; I will repay,*" says the Lord. On the contrary: "*If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.*" In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is the Word of the Lord Thanks be to God

GOSPEL

Matthew 16: 21 – 28

Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a person to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for their soul? The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

This is the Gospel of the Lord

Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ

NOTES ON THE READINGS

The first and final lessons today are very significant ones, each in their own right and impact. In the first is far more than just the call of Moses, and in the last, there is that enormous challenge to a discipleship that is as total as the Lord's.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

I have more than a sneaky suspicion that there will be many younger people who have never heard this tale, and therefore have missed a great deal of the formative stuff of Israel's experience and understanding of God. For older people the story should be familiar, but that alone may have helped it to be overlooked and passed by.

Knowing the story does not necessarily mean understanding it, either, so let's go back to basics.

Israel was in slavery in Egypt, there 'having arose I king who knew not Joseph.' Historians will give you the gen on that, but the issue was really a matter of virtual genocidal tactics on the part of the Egyptians authorities. Moses had grown up as an Egyptian, and after his brush with death for himself, had spent many years as a shepherd in the 'wilderness.' Here is the account of that man's call to become leader for Israel and to bring them from slavery into freedom. The story may well have been embellished somewhat, as sagas like this often do. But here is yet another example of God being the One Who rescues His people from almost certain extinction, at a time when they are past the end of their tether. It is always God Who rescues; and it is always done through a human who is prepared to run with the challenge.

The second issue here is that of Moses' request (or was it a demand?) for the Name of God. In ancient times, to know someone's name was to have quite some control over them, or at the very least, some significant connection. The answer to Moses' enquiry is a significant one, and the Name of God as recorder here became a powerful statement for all of Israel. So sacred was this Name that it could never be used in any but the most significant circumstance. YHWH is the verb to be in Hebrew parlance, so not only was the Name seen as holy; it was also enigmatic. I am Who I am; I will be Who I will be; I was Who I was. It was almost a sharp statement to Moses to stop asking stupid questions. 'The answer is far too big for you to handle, so butt out!

Psalm

The Psalm takes us into another area of the nature of God, one that is of huge importance in our understanding of God. For the Psalmist, indeed for the whole of Scripture, God becomes known through the things that He does in human history, in ordinary life, in the common things.

While the Psalmist would have been aware that there is a very great deal about God that is beyond our capacity to capture, there is also quite some of Him that can be seen, or at least experienced. God is to be found in the events of Israel's history, in the matters of life that are available to all people, provided they ponder things and do it with honesty.

Epistle

Not only is the above so, but the people of God need to see that one of their responsibilities is to reflect the character of their Father. It would seem that many people have operated on the principle that Christians were supposed to be good so that they would get to Heaven. In the light of that, the condescending response from others for the poor sillies who threw life away in the hope for a better next life misses the point entirely.

The Faith is about offering the most productive and valuable way to live, and so here Paul spells out some of the valuable characteristics. But it is not just a matter of 'being good.' It is a matter of fairness, justice and integrity, as – if you want to put it this way – that is what God calls us to, in order that all humans can have a life of worth and value.

Gospel

It is the most shallow of responses to the Faith to imagine that Jesus presented a goodie-two-shoes view of living and believing. There can never be the slightest doubt but that Jesus was aware of the powerful negative response to His life and teaching. He was well aware of the great human battle between good and evil, and the very likely response of many people to choose evil and calling it good.

Jesus was not crucified because He was on about something petty and unnecessary! All He said and did posed great threats to the *status quo* so that He knew that anyone who chose to follow Him had a hard row to hoe in front of them.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is funny but sad how easily, it seems, the attention of Sunday School teachers and preachers focussed on the insignificant and missed the important. I can remember way back having that business of the burning bush forced on my attention as a miracle, with everyone trying to prove (a) that it was miracle and (b) that is what a person had to believe. What was even more damaging, it was not until many years later that I discovered that business about Moses' question about God's name, YHWH, which is far more significant to the tale, and to Moses' call to lead Israel out of captivity. Why is it that so often we miss the wood and see only the trees, so to speak.

The important issues in that old saga have to do with the nature and activity of God, and our response to that. And there are two very important issues here that we manage, mostly, to miss or avoid.

Moses was called to go on a rather risky path, and one in which he was particularly vulnerable because of his past. Brought up as virtual royalty in Egypt, and having killed an Egyptian, he ran an enormous risk even thinking about showing his face in that part of the world, let alone in his confrontations with the Pharaoh. Just think about that a moment. But someone had to stick out their neck if Israel was going to have a future, and there were no magic wands to wave to bring about the release. This is what the Hebrew faith was about: what we call salvation, and what those Hebrews would have called 'room to move.' From slavery to freedom. From virtual extinction to a place of their own. And someone had to get stuck into the job. Someone human.

That is the first point.

And the second? Spend a moment to ponder what is being said when God offers only an enigma instead of a name. If I asked someone their name and they answered 'I am who I am,' I would have to assume that I am being given the brush-off. 'None of your business.' Or in more recent Australian, 'Rack off!' If it is God Who is saying this sort of thing, I would have to assume that the reason runs something like this. Stop a moment, Moses old thing, and think about what you are asking. The answer you are looking for is far, far too big for you to handle. That is why you had to take off your shoes, This is holy ground, This is highly significant stuff, so don't muck with it. '

Where does that get us? It seems to me that it gets us all into a position that means we need to realize that when we are talking important issues, life-issues, God-issues, then we need to stop and see that there are no pat answers, no easy solutions, no slide into banality.

There was a time in my life when I followed the pattern of the day, which seemed to divide people into cliques. It seems that most of the debate about religion was a struggle between I am right and you are wrong. If you did not believe this (in a particular way) or that (ditto) then you had to be wrong. Denominations were an expression of division, and that had been the accepted thing for centuries, it seemed.