

Sermons by Canon Keynes**Sunday 3rd July, 2005****Seventh Sunday after Pentecost****Sentence**

Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest, says the Lord. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. *Matthew 11: 28 – 29*

Collect

O God, You have prepared for those who love You such good things as pass our understanding: pour into our hearts such love towards You that we, loving You above all things, may obtain Your promises which exceed all that we can desire, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49 & 58-67****PSALM****45: 10 – 17****EPISTLE****Romans 7: 14 – 25****GOSPEL****Matthew 11:15-30****NOTES ON THE READINGS**

That OT Reading is really just a delightful old love story, and the account of life between Isaac and Rebekah seems to have remained that way. There is little to comment about that tale, but there is a lot to enjoy about it.

On the other hand, the Psalm really does belong to a long-past period in history, and really is little more than a cameo of life as it once was. There is very little chance of those attitudes ever becoming normal again, and thank heavens for that I would say.

Epistle

It seems to me more than a little easy to misunderstand what Paul is expressing, and yet I doubt if there is an honest person who does not relate to that internal tension we all experience. Good we know, and yet evil – however small it may seem – tends to emerge.

One of my difficulties for the modern reader is the present-day capacity of passing the buck. ‘The devil made me do it’ is NOT, **repeat NOT** what Paul is saying. I am never in any position to refuse the responsibility for my actions, and in fact I have a sneaky suspicion that our very own culture will collapse under the weight of its corporate refusal to accept any responsibility of any sort. This is a moral universe, and I would be most foolish to blame you for my follies and sins. Nor can I blame Adam, for Adam is me, and you, and everyone else.

Gospel

This incident where Jesus had words to say about the terribly human and inconsistent responses people offered to both John and Jesus has long been somewhat absorbing to me. It is a cameo both simple and powerful about the means by which we humans can fool ourselves that we have responded seriously, when in reality we put a spin on things to suit ourselves. It is nothing less than a deliberate attempt to solve our problems by avoiding them. In this instance, people castigated John because he came across as a puritan and a Spartan. On the other hand, they rejected Jesus because He did not fit the conventional pattern of the religious person. Both responses were made in order to allow the person to feel that they did not have to take either person seriously.

The middle section of this passage is likewise powerful, though the modern reader may well miss a lot of the impact. Whilst Korazin and Bethsaida were Jewish towns, none of the other were – or are. In an application of increasing pressure, Jesus made those people see that even outsiders and unbelievers were capable of responding to truth far more than the Jews who considered themselves superior. It is a litany of great impact – people Jews would have considered incapable of belief were seen by Jesus as far more capable of responding to truth than those of His own people. It is a devastating condemnation of the human capacity to hide from reality.

But it was not only Gentiles who were far more likely to respond honestly; a similar true response could be expected from what we may call the ‘little people.’ Is it a case of the bigger we get, the more importantly we see ourselves, and then go on to regard ourselves as beyond the reach of normal rules? This is an issue that is becoming

increasingly prevalent in our society, and will, sooner or later, bring our community crashing down around our ears.

Notes for a Sermon

I am not sure that people will understand, but when the whole ugly business of child abuse in the Church raised its head, I was fairly sure that many if not most would miss the point. In no way do I ever see sin of any sort as inexcusable, but I do see it as – well – inevitable. Let us begin at the beginning! The whole faith, Judaic as well as Christian, operates from the clearly perceived position that evil is rampant in life, and that almost all of it stems from human beings. That is the base: it is axiomatic.

While I am not certain of the facts, I was informed recently that the local BigW Store is having trouble even before the doors are opened. The nature of the trouble? That those employed to stock the shelves have themselves been pilfering the items that they have been employed to prepare for sale.

There is no doubt that anyone reading this could add to the list from their own experience with people. It is not just about pilfering, but about all manner of human cupidity and evil from the tiniest evidence of it to the most blatant and destructive. On top of that, I have yet to find anyone who has not had the inclination to do something selfish or destructive or even downright evil. Paul knew All about that, as today's Epistle underlines in red.

There are repercussions that should echo around our heads. There is nothing surprising in the fact that evil raises its head even in the Church and amongst Church people. Neither they nor I are sinless and perfect! I am capable of selfish stuff, sinful stuff, evil stuff, and much of the time the only thing that stands in my way is my awareness of the damage such courses of action create. (If once, when young, the concept of punishment by God was a factor, it has not been for many a long year. And that is because when Scripture talks of 'the wrath of God' is actually pointing out that God does not punish, but leaves us in the pooh of our own making, in the hope that we will learn from our stupidity and sin.)

So where does all this get us?

Take a paddle through the Gospel for today! It is a fascinating insight, also, into human nature.

In the first paragraph, there is the almost comic comparison between the reactions of people to John the Baptist with their reactions to Jesus. They thought John was a wowser, and Jesus a roué almost. And why did they express such attitudes? The answer is terribly human – they did it in order to provide themselves with the excuse of avoiding the issues raised by those, John and Jesus. Now, you have done that sort of stuff, too. Found a reason (excuse actually) to avoid something you knew, deep down, to be true. Side-stepped important stuff. But you still knew, in your heart of hearts, that you should have responded honestly. How easy it is to pull the wool over our own eyes, and occasionally over other people's eyes. We cannot, however, do it with God.

In the second paragraph, Jesus illustrated our rather more corporate capacity to sidestep issues, deliberately missing the evidence and the main points of Jesus' teaching because we really do not want to head in His direction. Don't worry too much about miracle in this passage. It is not the surprise factor that leads people to believe or not believe. It was the sheer bloodymindedness that we humans employ to avoid the issues we know to be true. We are past masters at it, and Jesus simply wanted people to look in the mirror and see their own dishonesty.

So when we get to that third paragraph of today's Gospel, the main point Jesus stressed hits us right between the eyes. It is not – repeat NOT – naivety that Jesus was commending, but the simple straightforward capacity of (some) kids to see through cant and acknowledge truth. You are not required to become childish; you are challenged here to be open and honest and prepared to follow wherever the truth (of whatever situation) takes you.

The world will be a remarkably different place if and when people operate thus. It will still not make us perfect, but it will make life one hell of a lot more tolerable and workable And just.

Sunday 10th July, 2005

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

The words that You have spoken are spirit and life, O Lord, You have the words of eternal life.

John 6:63 & 68

Collect

O Lord we beseech You mercifully to receive the prayers of Your people who call upon You, and grant that we may both perceive and know what things we ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill them, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Genesis 25: 19 – 34

PSALM

119: 105 – 112

EPISTLE

Romans 8: 1 – 11

GOSPEL

Matthew 13: 1 - 23

NOTES ON THE READINGS

It may take a little imagination to include the Old Testament Lesson in this comment, but it would seem that the rest of the readings concentrate on the expressed need to recognize the truth about God, life and Gospel and commit oneself to it. To do otherwise is seen as little less than perversion of the truth.

About the only way to include the First Lesson in such an outlook is to note how little value Esau placed on his birthright, preferring to fill his belly rather than his heart and mind. It is all a matter of choice, - a choice based on seeing what is eternally valuable and what is transient.

FIRST LESSON

These old sagas from Genesis take me back to my Sunday School days, reminding me of the great pity that perhaps very few children these days ever hear the old tales. The story of the contention between Jacob and Esau do not say a great deal about either man. One did not consider important matters had value, and the other placed too much value on – if not his heritage, then on his own future. In neither case, did either man value the truth, or each other as people. It takes little imagination to see how rapidly relationships disintegrate under those circumstances.

As the stories unfold, Jacob retains the title of ‘supplanter’ for that is what his name means, and the tension between the two men persisted for decades. Not the greatest way to live!

PSALM

Almost as a contrast to that tale is the perception expressed in this small portion of Psalm 119. As a youngster, I can recall wondering how, in the name of fortune, *anyone* could place such value on the ‘word of God.’ At that stage in life, the God thing seemed to promise little other than boredom! I hasten to add that such a view has moved on from there very many years ago.

Here in this short passage is a hymn to the Word of the Lord, a carol rejoicing in the value of truth, integrity, and, in the final analysis, common sense.¹ It is only when truth, of any situation, is held to be of great value, is any sort of relationship between individuals or peoples possible. Without it, there is only huge tension and mistrust. There is no future heading that way!!!!

EPISTLE

¹ Notice how, in this day and age, common sense is very far from common, and has become really quite rare.

One of the most reassuring passages in Scripture is here in front of us, and while I find sadness that there are many who just take this as the Great Release, there remains the enormous and loving generosity of the Father to be taken hold of and – well, enjoyed. However it does not come without call for significant response from us.

I have just been talking, with a rather beautiful minister of another Church, of a person with whom we are both working. That person is struggling with the Faith, partly wanting it and partly wanting to avoid it. The theory of that mutual ‘parishioner’ is that no one has the slightest choice in anything very much, and is bound by genes, upbringing and experience to whatever path life opens up. It is, if you like, ‘predestination’ in reverse!

What Paul is expressing here is precisely the opposite to the view of that person – there IS choice, and there is responsibility to take that choice, and the choice that a person takes is illustrative of the sort of person who chooses. This choice is not as ‘spiritual’ as many would like to make it, for it is a very basic and down-to-earth choice, Either, I choose to follow truth wherever it leads me, or I choose to avoid truth because I want to be the captain of my own destiny.

GOSPEL

Just a note for what it is worth. I have more than a sneaky suspicion that Jesus did not offer any explanation of His parables, but rather the Evangelist included his version in order to encourage his readers to get the idea, so to speak. To explain parables is surely as anticlimactic as explaining your jokes. All that does is make them fall entirely flat!

Another conviction of mine is that this particular parable has long been mis-named. It has always been the Parable of the Sower in all my lifetime, when in reality it should be called the Parable of the Soils. That is its emphasis. The question is not the seed, but into what type of soil that seed is dropped.

There is also, in this passage, a rather strange (to modern ears) rumour about Jesus use of parables anyhow. In our rather wooden Western way, it may be assumed that Jesus used parables in order to dismay His listeners deliberately. Little could be further from the truth.

In what is a repeated statement in the Gospels, Jesus made it quite clear that there would have been many people who would have valued as clear an indication of where the truth lay as He had placed in front of folk. It may well remain true that there are lots of people out there who are searching for the truth, and who maybe have never heard, except in the depths of their own being, the sort of assurance they are looking for. One of the huge disadvantages of this present time is the often-repeated assertion that there are no ultimate statements of truth, only relative ones An illustration, one suspects, that the majority still do not want to know, for it may require them to change, and grow, and accept responsibility,

NOTES FOR A SERMON

We have been having a debate, I guess you can say, three of us around here, as to the value and the genuineness of the Scriptures and the Christian Faith. One of our trio seems determined to establish the fact that all we believe in has been corrupted over the centuries, so that we are unable to know exactly what it was Jesus taught and said and did. That particular person feels that we should either prove the matter, or opt out of the Faith.

Part of the reason for the guy’s stance lies in his background, which has – in all certainty! – been a difficult and damaging thing for anyone to survive. Part of it lies also in the fact that I can only suspect that reliability and integrity is not the sort of thing he had ever received from his family or others around him. And perhaps the main part of the person’s stance lies in the fact that, perhaps secretly, he longs for all he has discovered about the Faith is true, and that he can rely on it, live by it, and if the crunch comes, die by it.

In the meantime, he is trying to tear it down, to test it at the edges and the middle, to try and find what are the weaknesses and where he can put a handle on them. He also expects my other mate and me to demand that he take hold of this faith and just live by it. He is disappointed, we suspect, because we lay no demands on him, make no expectations of him, but simply offer him the chance to try it out.

I have more than a sneaky suspicion that the Lord of this Faith is chuckling to Himself as he watches our mate fool around the edges. Even He lays no demands, but simply holds out His hands in offering. And He will be waiting to see which way our mate finally jumps, ready to welcome him on that next stage of the journey.

Five or six decades ago, I suspect that I would have been pushing and shoving that mate of ours to 'make a decision.' I would also be pushing to make sure that he dotted all the 'i's and crossed all the 't's - doctrinally correct and flawless. (I wonder how many folk I put off through all that sustained pressure.)

It took me a long time to realize the way that Jesus operated. With those who considered themselves very religious, Jesus certainly was close to the bone and right to the point. But with those who had a clearer and truer view of themselves, He was all patience and interest and concern. Sure, He talked about different soils and different responses, but it was not a pressure-cooker approach, but more a 'what do you think of that?' syndrome.

For the Faith is a matter of choice, and choice is a matter of responsibility. As Albert Camus once said, 'Not to decide IS to decide.' So the choosing is hugely important, but you do have a Lord Who gives you room to move, and think and debate and discuss. And One Who longs for you to choose sensibly and commit fully – for your benefit, not His..

Sunday 17th July, 2005

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Psalm 86:15

Collect

O God, You alone can order our unruly wills and affections; teach us to love what You command and to desire what You promise, that, among the changes and chances of this world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Genesis 28:10-19a

PSALM

139: 1-11 & 23-24

EPISTLE

Romans 8: 12 – 25

GOSPEL

Matthew 11:24 – 30 & 36 – 43

NOTES ON THE READINGS

There is a simple and telling observation in this short cameo from the Patriarchal Sagas. It is also rather encouraging for the present-day disciple.

Jacob was one of the least ‘pretty’ of the OT Characters, and initially very self-driven. His struggle for superiority over his brother is legendary, and yet, like most bullies, there was some sort of underlying fear in the man. In this incident, as he left familiar surroundings, partly to escape his brother and partly to find himself a wife, he had what amounted to an almost change-of-life-or-direction experience that was something we all need to have.

As he travelled through unfamiliar territory, he would have suffered the fears of a rather unconfident tourist! Conventional wisdom of the time understood that, if a person was outside the range of his or her god or goddess, then they were very likely to be overtaken by an unfamiliar and probably fearful god or goddess. Who knew what the ramifications of that might be.

But the vision that came to Jacob² made him see that this God was rather bigger than conventional gods, and there was nowhere Jacob could go that would be outside the purview of Isaac’s God. It may seem a little and strange lesson for such a person, but it was nothing of the sort. Here was no threat over him to ensure he behaved. Here was solid reassurance that wherever he went God was present, supporting and encouraging. This was a monumental leap forward for the patriarchs, and for all who followed them.

PSALM

This Psalm should be quite well-known and it is really quite all-embracing. Just read over the Psalm again, and notice the impact of what is being said. Remember Jonah who thought that he could escape the purview of God, but discovered otherwise. Again this was no demand for loyalty, but rather a challenge to see that God is nearer to us than any human being can reach – and that is encouragement not threat. It is also strong reminder that, regardless of the circumstances of our life, God is right there in the middle of it all.

EPISTLE

Dear old Paul was never easy to follow; like a lot of us, the man thought-hopped and sometimes the connection is difficult to make. In this passage we have two apparently disconnected thoughts, and each needs to be looked at separately.

One of the ‘obligations’ that Paul mentions is one that rather too many Christians miss or avoid. So glad are they to accept ‘salvation by faith’ that they do not take on board the responsibilities (Obligations to use Paul’s word) that ensue. So strong has been the stress on that ‘salvation by faith’ that many will not even consider any other or added factor. This – I suspect – is why so many so-called Christians tend to slip away or give it away.

What Paul is saying here is that, once a person decided to choose Christ, there needs to be a growing awareness for listening to where the truth lies. This is the point he is raising when referring to the Spirit. In simple terms, this choice is an expression of belonging, a determination to follow, and the divine provision of the direction

² And note the parallel experiences and reports in the New Testament, e.g., Stephen,.

to follow. It is an intimate relationship, so close that one may call the Lord of History 'Daddy' for that is what *Abba* means. The fact that there is neither pressure nor extortion indicates two things to me: the first is that both the continuing choice and the responsibility always lies with the individual. The second thing? It is only this way that a person grows and matures.

And that *Abba* is right there even in the middle of struggles and questions about life, and in the midst of all the strife and tragedy that consists in our lives. Being Christian provides no guarantee of protection from either disaster or profound questions. If it were, it would lead only to the weakness of the individual. However, Paul is pointing up what he understands of the process of struggle: that it is designed to help reach towards maturity.

GOSPEL

Classify me as naughty if you will, but I remain convinced that Jesus Himself did not offer that rather twee explanation of the parable. One does not have to explain either jokes or parables – if they do, it crumbles the whole thing to dust.

It seems to me as if whoever chose today's readings chose wisely with a clear theme in mind. Even here in the Gospel, with one of Jesus' more interesting parables, there is the theme running through that the people of God – all people, let's face it! – are living in what seems to be very much the world of dualism, where evil and good exist side by side. That is the arena. There is no escape. So the real issue lies, not in the existence of both, but for the need to choose on which side one will belong, and then the determination to remain true to that choice.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

In a light-hearted start to this morning, I relate something that has long been quite formative in our family's history. It was decades ago now, and our children were quite young, and around the corner lived a couple of young boys who befriended our one and only son. Those two boys were constantly at our place, and our young bloke constantly at theirs. Nothing outstanding there, you say.

One of those young lads was constantly regaling us with jokes he had picked up, here there and everywhere. Some of them, as you might imagine, were funny; others were rather flat, except for the teller. However the point of the story is that the young lad would spin the yarn and wait for laughs. Whether he got them or not there was always the sting in the tail. He would then go on to explain the joke, repeat the explanation and then recite, 'D'ya get it? D'ya get it?' That repeated phrase somehow embedded itself in our family memory, and it would be brought out whenever anyone else spoiled something by explaining it all over and over.

Parables are meant to sink into a person's memory, and then gently or firmly explode in the listener's head and heart, and make its impact unaided. Is it not true that one learns far better from something one discovers for oneself, than from something one is told. (Especially if that telling is repeated ad nauseum.!)

Wheat and weeds. Or wheat and tares if your memory goes back to the King James' Version of the Bible. But I have more than a sneaky suspicion that the real message of this parable, and of much else of what Jesus said and did, falls on deaf ears because we do not expect to hear anything at all rough-house. Surely faith matters are soft and lovely and only for the front room of the house.

So I tell you a story to underline, somewhat sadly, the extent to which we Christians sometimes miss the point entirely. It is a long time ago now, like the tale above, but the lesson is as modern as tomorrow.

We'd met in a place rather too public to deal with the issues significantly, but he was a pastor in a Church group and he had fallen on hard times. As he said to me at the time, evangelical Churches like his do not deal all that kindly with leaders who run into difficulty especially with matters of marriage and divorce. He was bereft, for it looked like the end of his entire ministry, all his life, and he saw no future whatever.

Now I have to report that, as I mentioned to him at the time, I suspected that I understood what was going on, having been there myself some years before. In the attempt to help him see some light at the end of the tunnel, I was rude enough to suggest that the outcome of this very bitter experience may well make of him a rather more useful pastor and mentor, because – as I have discovered over the years, - the best healer in the world is a wounded healer. Someone who has been in the depths is far more likely to be helpful than someone who knows only from

study. The poor man was so weighed down with his woes that he could not, would not see it, and that place was not the situation where we could take the discussion further.

What I am trying to express is the extent to which rather too much of populist Christianity of today operates on something other than the Biblical emphasis of the Faith. The modern thing is that the faithful believer will be blessed by God and everything will work out wonderfully. It seems to me that this sort of 'theology' is not far removed from the cargo cult perception of some rather unsophisticated tribes in times past.

One of the things that strike me as enormously important is to get a clear and realistic picture of what this Faith is about. It is not all about sweetness and light. It is not soft soap and pretty pictures. On the contrary, it is a matter of facing the harsh realities of the life and cosmos in which we live, and find an answer to even the ugliness and negative stuff.

Stop a moment and think: at the centre of the Faith is crucifixion. A hideous business, made unrealistically so by that recent film of *Whatisname*, but a hideous business that resulted from the sheer bloody-minded refusal of so-called sensible people and leaders even to listen to what was important. Truth and justice were crushed under human evil. That's the sort of world we live in, and that is the sort of world that this Faith is designed to answer. No room for sweetness and light; no room for pussy-footing; no room for baloney.

Hence today's Parable. You are living, Jesus made quite clear, in a world where good and evil live alongside each other, and that is the way it will remain until the Parousia. Time and again evil will appear not only to have the upper hand, but also to be enormously destructive. Do not be surprised, Jesus was saying. He was also emphasizing 'do not fear them.'

There are several repercussions, some to me, that emerge from this parable. The first – not stated but real – is that just as hot and cold provide alternatives so that you can know the difference, so it is with good and evil. And what you do with the choices that line up in front of you tend to illustrate the sort of person you are, and the sorts of things you consider important. When I have choices, I have also responsibility. This is what makes me 'me,' for good or ill.

One of the issues that worried me most about that pastor I mentioned is that he seemed to have embedded in his psyche the proposition that if all went well, it was because God was blessing His faithful one.' If all went awry, then sin was at the door and God was jumping off the bandwagon. So it was obvious to that poor bloke that God had deserted him, and he was bereft indeed. I am sure that the truth of the matter lay elsewhere altogether.

I tell a story against myself, again from my distant but well-remembered past. Like the pastor above, I too had had what struck me as something that should never have happened. 'Why me?' is the usual impassioned plea, and to that question there is rarely an answer at all. I was questioned by a younger and far less theologically educated person about why I was complaining. When told the reason, said younger person stunned me. 'You are asking the wrong question,' she said. Trying asking 'What are you saying to me in this, Lord?'

The answer to that question was almost immediate! What had been happening kept my feet on the ground, made me (not just helped me!) to understand where many people were coming from, and had effectively shaped my ministry up to them, and even more so afterwards. It was far from the nicest business, but it was remarkably effective when seen in that balanced light.

Sunday 24th July, 2005

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*Romans 8:38-9***Collect**

O God,, the protector of all who trust in You., without Whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy; increase and multiply upon us Your mercy that, with You as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal that we finally lose not the things eternal. Grant this , O heavenly Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON****Genesis 29:15 – 28****Psalm****105:1-11****EPISTLE****Romans 8:26 – 39****GOSPEL****Matthew 13: 44 -58****NOTES ON THE READINGS****Old Testament Lesson**

It must be a well-known story, certainly for older people who remember back to Sunday School lessons. You can call me nasty if you wish, but I have always enjoyed this tale because Jacob the rather unpleasant splplanter got his come-uppance well and truly.

Last week we thought about nasty things happening, and while sometimes they can be quite inexplicable there are other times when some value can be seen in them. Mind you, when it came to Jacob finding the wrong woman in bed, he may well have been rather too tipsy to notice before morning, but he should have checked beforehand wouldn't you think? On the other hand it was rather rough on Leah, I suspect.

Psalm

It is not hard for us to take on board the comments and attitude of the first part of today's Psalm, and it may be just as well that we look in that direction more often. Time and again people have commented that it is only when we encounter situations most unpleasant that we realize the extent to which we have been blessed.

On the other hand, this Psalm finishes up in a situation somewhat foreign to us, and of small interest.

Epistle

This strange subject of predestination used to be of huge fascination to young Christians fifty or so years ago. Great debates raged as to what Paul meant, and whether 'once a person is saved they are always saved ...' While it is quite clear that Paul was encouraging disciples to move forward confidently in spite of contrary pressures, it is also quite clear that he was not into the ball-gazing business.

Please bear in mind that, in the days Paul wrote, not only was life 'brutish and short,' it was also a risky business being classified as Christian. Not only was one operating outside the law in being so, one was also likely to be victim of random but terrible persecution. How could anyone possibly say that 'Jesus is Lord' when the more prevalent oath, *Caesar is Lord* was clearly the case.. Please see the enormous encouragement Paul offered in the light of that enormous struggle. God is stronger than human evil is really what Paul was emphasizing.

Gospel

It may be a little helpful, in the light of today's culture here where we live, to try and tell someone that to follow Jesus is a highly rewarding path to travel, and see what sort of hearing you get from people. However, this is exactly what Jesus was doing when He uttered those almost monosyllabic parables. The pearl of great price, for instance. Mind you, it has to be said that those of us who have so chosen to follow Christ, this parable says it all. However, it is most necessary for people to look below the surface to find the reality of all this..

On top of that, there is the underlining of last week's series of Parables, that the Christian has the task of living for good in a world that does not want to know. Some people these days find certain strangeness in that; however Jesus was nothing if He was not down-to-earth.

As if to underline that fact, even for Himself, Matthew went on to report the outcome of a repeat visit to Nazareth. And to underline the antipathy which met Him from His own townspeople. It is perhaps helpful to note that, in Jewish culture, a person was able to disregard claims made by any person whose antecedents were unknown. If I, a total stranger, expected you to take me a face value and believe everything I said, then I could expect exactly the opposite. However, if I was known to you, and my family, then you were expected to sit up and take quite some notice.

However, here, although Jesus fitted the category of someone well-known, the determination of the locals to refuse any credence to Jesus ran contrary to their cultural requirements. It is only saying what you already know: that it is not what people know to be true that they will follow. They will follow only whatever they want, true or false.

And that is a fair description of rather too many people in our own culture, and day and age.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

One of the things about relationships with other cultures that leaves me fascinated is the way that many of them, especially Asian ones, have a real thing about the danger and outcomes of 'losing face.' I do not profess to understand the process or much of the reasoning behind it, but I do catch sight of the way in which relationships are complicated by the need to take those things into account. Almost anything is tolerable except that possibility of losing face.

I really should do something about finding more out about the matter. In such ancient cultures, there is certain to be all sorts of well-established reasons for the pattern, all manner of approaches to deal with it, but I suspect that, behind it all, lies something of a deep regard for persons. Anyhow, I really should find out.

In our culture, there is a far less attractive way of dealing with unappealing or unattractive issues. In times past, this might have shown up in a studious avoidance of some subjects, or the rise in temper if someone pushes or attempts to push. These days, it seems to me, the subject under review gets attention from what are euphemistically called spin doctors, whose main task is to avoid the issue, to avoid the truth at whatever cost. On the surface, all will appear as sweetness and light, sweet reasonableness, but the reality is nothing less than the blatant avoidance of the issue, with all manner of serious repercussion of the matter is pushed. This process deserves its proper name. During World War II it was called 'propaganda' – but nowadays it is really The Lie. Falsehood. Baloney.

There is nothing new about this. It is a vastly long established pattern of human behaviour. Jacob experienced it, as per this morning OT Lesson. But then he performed it in his brother, with the connivance of his Mum. So it was a case of chickens coming home to roost.

And then there is that very telling tail end of today's Gospel passage.

'Isn't this the carpenter's son?'" Here is no looking down on the mere tradesman thing. It is not a class-distinction slur. It is nothing less than rather typical; human deviousness at its most unattractive. There was a somewhat self-protective process that went on in Hebrew society, so we are led to believe. If someone unknown to you laid any claim on you or your loyalty, you had every grounds for ignoring the demand if the person was a complete unknown to you. Who could tell what misleading stuff could come from someone you had never heard of?

On the other hand, if that person was someone you knew, of whose family you knew, or was someone who came from the same place as you, and there were quick and easy means of identification, then you were required to make an honest response.

In a somewhat bitter twist, the inhabitants of Jesus' home town reversed the normal rules of human interaction because they wanted to avoid all the implications of that very wisdom and power that they recognized. Had the normal patterns have been honoured, Jesus could have expected a positive response from the folk of Nazareth. Perhaps because of the Aussie 'tall poppy syndrome,' or more likely because they did not want the responsibility of taking clear action in line with Jesus' teaching, they turned their back.

As is usually the case, when people act so, the repercussions fall most heavily on themselves, even if they do not notice it. It was not so much a case of Jesus' hands being tied that 'He could do no miracles there,' but it was a case of when no one listens, no one benefits. They shut Him out.

There is not a great step to take between the actions of those people so long ago, and the people amongst whom you live, or even we us ourselves. All of us are remarkably capable of avoiding the truth – in fact we are not all that capable of handling it properly. And when any of us try to live by the lie, we may survive for a while, but, like Jacob, sooner or later a worm turns, and the lie blows up in our face.

Sunday 31st July, 2005

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Sentence

The Lord is near to all who call upon Him in truth. He fulfills the desire of all who fear Him, hears their cry and saves them
Psalm 145: 18-19

Collect

Almighty God, Whose beloved Son for our sake willingly endured the agony and shame of the Cross; give us courage and patience to take up our cross daily and follow Him, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever
Amen

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**Genesis 32: 22-31****Psalm****17:1 – 7 & 16****Epistle****Romans 9:1 – 8****GOSPEL****Matthew 14: 13 – 21****Special Note:**

Your attention is drawn to the footnote on the previous page, a translation of the word, 'Israel.' It strikes me as rather important to take hold of something all Jews would know, that the name of their tribe and nation means 'those who struggle with God.' It is a picture that we could well take hold of.

NOTES ON THE READINGS**Old Testament Lesson**

There is rather great sadness in the extent to which these old patriarchal stories are ignored or forgotten, for – as far as Israel was concerned, they indicate so much of the nation's story of its *raison d'être*. The tale is there, warts and all, and should be a rather helpful basis for modern people to work from.

In this section, Jacob was returning to his original home, with all he has in terms of personages and wealth, but the closer he got to home the more he worried about having short-changed his brother a decade and a half before. Guilty consciences do make fools of us all, very often, and that was the issue here.

Right in the middle of that personal struggle, Jacob has another to contend with. The reader is not expected to take the story literally, but rather to embrace the fact that here was an enormous struggle of both conscience and awareness. He was returning to his parents and their view of God, however immature that may have been. And he was returning from that other branch of the family which was not party to so much of the development of what we may call theology. You will recall that Rachel still held on to her familial gods.

For someone who emerged from that period in history when faith was seen as something you said you believed in, most of it expressed in proposition, we find here the rather more basic issue of having to struggle to discover what, exactly, it is you believe, how you view life and God and relationships.

This was Jacob's struggle, and it ill behoves us to forget or ignore that. Growth in faith has far more to do with finding significant answers to questions, than it does with assent to some doctrine or ism.

Psalm

If you consider that this Psalmist is doing little other than trying to justify himself before God then I suspect the point has been missed entirely. While many of the people of Israel were like lots of the rest of us and only went through the motions of 'faith,' there were those who really did try to get to the root of the matter. It strikes me that this psalmist is clear about the need for any of the people of God to recognize the nature of God and respond to fellows along the lines of that character.

Please re-read this Psalm in this light, and see how it is rather much a description of someone attempting to be true to Jahweh in a world where the majority of people took the rather more selfish path.

Epistle

Talking of selfish paths, I suspect that there would be few people today prepared to follow in the direction that Paul here points: offering of himself for the salvation of his people! I have long found this passage a

fascinating one, for the principle applies not only to the Hebrews of St. Paul's time, but for the majority of people in our own. Like the Jews of old, people are far too self-oriented to see (or even *want* to see) what is important and valuable. Actually, it seems to me that Paul could well be talking about Anglicans – we have all the benefits and support systems to lead us to solid and wide-ranging faith, yet miss the point in what is becoming little other than feel-good stuff that masquerades as Christianity.

Gospel

It may be a little repetitious, but I take you in a direction that may well be not your usual path. For far too many, such miracles as today's Feeding of the Five Thousand is seen as just another proof that Jesus is the Son of God, because no one can do anything like this sign. Such a response is sadly wide of the mark, for that is not what this sign was pointing to.³ It may seem a little strange to us, but to Jews with their long sense of history, the Feeding Sign was a clear recall of the Moses experience in the desert during the Exodus. There, under God, Moses fed the people with manna and quail. As the old sagas make clear, there was only ever just enough for the time, and anyone who tried to collect too much had it go bad on them.

As you recall the story of the feeding in the wilderness, under Moses, re-read the Jesus instance and draw the conclusions that you are meant to draw. Not only was there enough to eat, but stacks left over. (And as John conveys in his recounting of the story, the imagery is extended to make clear that the feeding is by Jesus giving of Himself – body and blood.

So it is not a miracle to prove Jesus as the Son of God, but rather illustrates fact one (a) that Jesus is far greater than Moses, and (b) that life is to be found in the self-giving Lord, Who calls His disciples to do likewise.

NOTES FOR A SERMON

Don't ask me how it happened, but it is one of the 'benefits' of the Internet and Emails. I have just deleted an unwanted and most unwelcome email that offered to sharpen my leadership skills (I am at the delicate age of 70 plus) by attending a conference in Sydney at the cost (Conference only) of \$585.00. The fact that it would cost me that again to get there, and probably that again for accommodation really does underline to me how the world these days is geared, not to hone your leadership skills, but to rip you off in large lumps. In almost any area of life, especially in terms of Governmental matters, the success or otherwise of a task or role is measured by the amount of money thrown at it. There seems to be no way of measuring if that thrown money accomplishes its task; even to think like that is regarded as highly questionable.

The sort of presuppositions in that process of gaining leadership skills seems to be a matter largely of getting on top of or at the throat of your competition. It really is 'dog eat dog' sort of stuff. It also operates on the proposition that if something is very expensive then it has *ipso facto* to be effective. More often than not, little could be further from the truth.

Perhaps one of the reasons for Jesus' apparently failing popularity these days lies in the fact that He would have pooh-pooed that sort of process with considerable disdain. It should be surprising to contemporary people to stop and see that nothing of what Jesus was on about or talked about or pointed people towards came at any cost to a person, except perhaps to their pride. Perhaps the thing that strikes me most is that whereas leadership these days is seen as a matter of getting on top and superiority, for Jesus leadership is always a matter of service, working humbly and honestly alongside the person or people around you.

That apparent miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand was never perpetrated in order to stun the assembled throng into belief, but – as all Jesus' miracles⁴, and parables – to get people to think – usually outside the square somewhat.

This sign (to use John's term,) was to get people thinking in terms of Jesus and Moses. Moses, of course, was Israel's 'superstar' so to speak, and no one in Israel's history ever reached anything like his height and importance. But in His quiet and thought-provoking way, Jesus asked people to compare, to see the difference, and to ponder which 'icon' to follow.

³ Try reading John's Gospel Chapter 6

⁴ Was it CHDodd who made the comment that, in Jesus' ministry miracles were really only acted parables, designed to get people thinking. This is why John, in his Gospel, calls them signs – σημεια

People then, as people these days, look to their leaders to be strong, decisive, and to do for them what they are not prepared to do for themselves. To be the small m messiah. Such a calling was never in Jesus' purview, for that would have been no different from any other guru or guide. Our Lord made it quite clear that His sort of leadership had nothing to do with rip-off, nothing to do with high expense, and certainly nothing to do with getting on top of the competition. It was all about service, self-giving, going the extra mile, and always, absolutely always, ensuring that no one but no one was belittled or put down in the process.

It is not an easy path for mere humans to follow. Like computers our 'default mode' is to get on top, control, bully, pester, and demand. It takes more than a little thought and much more determination to opt out of default mode, and to operate as servant. Once one does, then the opportunity to listen to and hear others makes it far more possible for a creative and conciliatory outcome to emerge from whatever debate r discussion is going on