

**Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2005**  
**Canon Ron Keynes**

**Third Sunday after Pentecost**

**Sentence**

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come, not to call the righteous but the sinners

*Matthew 9:12-2*

**Collect**

O God, You have assured the human family of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Saviour: deliver us from the death of sin and raise us to new life in Him, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Genesis 12: 1 – 9**

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

**PSALM**

**33: 1 – 12**

Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous: for it befits the just to praise Him  
 Give to the Lord thanks upon the harp: and sing His praise to the lute of ten strings.  
 O sing Him a new song: make sweetest melody, with shouts of praise.  
 For the word of the Lord is true: and all His works are faithful.  
 He loves righteousness and justice: the earth is filled with the loving-kindness of the Lord  
 By the word of the Lord were the heavens made: and their numberless stars by the breath of His mouth  
 He gathered the waters of the sea as in a water-skin: and laid up the deep in his treasures.  
 Let the whole earth fear the Lord: and let the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.  
 For He spoke and it was done: He commanded, and it stood fast  
 The Lord frustrates the counsels of the nations: He brings to nothing the devices of the peoples.  
 But the counsels of the Lord shall endure for ever: the purposes of His heart from generation to generation.  
 Blessed is the nation that whose God is the Lord: the people He chose to be His own possession.

**EPISTLE**

**Romans 4:13 –25**

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered

over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

## GOSPEL

### Matthew 9:9-13 & 18-26

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

While he was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples. Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed." Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment.

When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region.

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

This is a remarkably significant set of readings, doubtless designed to get us thinking and exploring, in order to see matters on a wider panorama than heretofore. It is all about faith, but in a rather more profound pattern than most people care to think about. As I often suggest, this is 'hard hat and seat belt territory.'

## OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Never, *never* lose sight of the fact that here is the beginning of Jewish history, the *heilesgeschichte* of your Faith too. With Abraham, the Torah moves from myth to history, and very interesting history at that.

It tends to be assumed that this Abram was someone who had long contact with Him Whom you know as, God, but the reality is quite otherwise. Having come from 'Ur of the Chaldees,' Abram would have been called Iraqi these days. From the Tigris –Euphrates River he had moved to Haran in today's Syria. But this all means that Abram would have been, almost certainly, a moon-worshipper. So why is this particular person touched on the shoulder by a God Whom he did not know? Almost certainly because Abram had become disenchanted with the theology of moon worship, considering that there had to be something more significant elsewhere. Abram was an inquisitive person who needed answers. And if you want to know what is the nature of faith, it has a lot to do with searching for answers, and being prepared to go looking.

## Psalm

It is interesting to notice how, quietly yet powerfully, some of these old psalms convey some very interesting theology. Sometimes one wonders why psalms retain their position in Scripture; other times the contribution they offer is remarkable.

Although this Psalm commences in a predictably noisy way (lots of sound and music!) it does not stay there. From verse four, the point and purpose of the worship of God becomes quite tangible. Notice how often words like 'true,' or 'justice' or 'righteousness'<sup>1</sup> recur. What is more interesting, to me at least, occurs in verse 6. **By the word of the Lord were the heavens made.** A Biblical constant is that God spoke and things happened. Notice how often this shows up. And then there is the refrain of some Psalms- v 10*ff* – that this God of justice and truth has a habit of bringing down nations and cultures that refuse such issues. As someone once put it, this is a moral universe. And that is something to celebrate!

## Epistle

The Apostle Paul is notoriously difficult to follow in so much of what he wrote. This is not to knock him, but rather to draw attention to the fact that he often 'thought-hopped.' (Reading back over much of what I write, it

<sup>1</sup> Note, as mentioned elsewhere and often, justice and righteousness are the same thing

is easy to find similar faults.) In other words, it may take quite some thinking through to espy what the Apostle was trying to express.

Another difficulty for modern Christians is the extent to which some Biblical words or phrases seem to have taken on a life of their own. In Christian jargon, some words are invested with something completely different! 'Faith' is one of those words so coloured; so is 'grace.'

The emphasis in this passage is on the faithfulness of Abram in responding to the call of God, both in his initial pilgrimage, and in response to the promise of a son. Now if any reader assumes that Abram was constant and totally true in that latter issue, then it behoves them to read the Biblical account. Remember Hagar and Ishmael! It is a matter of faith with quite some slips, and while that is not meant to be critical, it is meant to be real.

The focal choice in this matter of faith really does come down, not to miraculous things, but to issues of integrity, justice and honesty. It is a solemn and sometimes severe choice, especially in the world in which we live currently, where 'spin' is what you'll get, and that relates very poorly to truth and integrity.

## GOSPEL

Here in this fascinating selection for a Gospel reading, we have quite a significant series of cameos, each of which have to do with faith.

The first part of the cameo is the call to Matthew. One may well wonder why someone like this tax-collector – and one who had to be something of a loner! – left all and followed Jesus. The answer would have a great deal to do with (a) the reality touch of Jesus, telling things like they were, and (b) Matthew's disenchantment with the good life (with wealth as a focus.) As in most cases, wealth tends to be gained through somewhat nefarious means, and tax collection was onesuch. Think that through, if you will.

Then there is the contrast provided by the Pharisees, who would have been convinced that they had the one and only handle on the (religious) truth, and yet were so caught up with rule-and-regulation religion that they overlooked completely the fundamental issues. Most Pharisaic people do, whether old Jews of Jesus' day or modern fundamentalist Christians (or Muslims and anyone!) of today. The quote Jesus tossed back at them is part of the Biblical record!

Even more powerful is the twin cameo about two women, one young and the other older. Notice how the older lady had her problem for as long as the younger one had been alive. Note, too, that the senior lady may well have been only in her mid to late 20s anyhow.<sup>2</sup>

There are some other factors to note about the contrasting women. The first, the 12-year-old, surely had a greater claim on Jesus' time and attention, being the child of the ruler of a synagogue. Here is the respectable family, and one in sore need. And that child had previously had the whole of her life in front of her. Now she had died.

Contrasting that is the women who 'interrupted' the process. If you can stand the strain of reality here, this second lady would have been regarded as a perpetual outcast from normal society, because she had been menstruating without interruption for 12 years. In normal circumstances, that 'time of the month' thing meant women were regarded as 'unclean' and isolated. Certainly you may regard that as horrific, but those were the breaks then. And this lady had the problem in spades. It must have been an horrific burden to bear, for no one would ever consider her as a possible wife. Her life was closed down. Small wonder that her approach to Jesus was an attempt at total anonymity! She wanted no one to know of her problem, yet she longed for an end to it.

Jesus' approach is exactly what you might expect, if you think it through. He would have been aware, culturally attuned to processes in that day, of why this lady tried the back door approach to be healed. Jesus also knew that, once she was healed, everyone, *everyone* needed to know that her ailment had been healed. While she may have been mortified to be asked 'up front,' she would have been relieved beyond measure to know that she needed to offer no explanation to anyone after this event. Her sense of freedom would have been total.

But that left the 'more deserving one' in the lurch. The little lass had died. However, Jesus honoured the confidence of the ruler, as well as his love for his child, and the lass was restored to life.

---

<sup>2</sup> Did you know that the average life expectancy in the Roman world was about 25 years?

Each of these different aspects of faith has its own contribution to make to our understanding of what it means to believe. Each of them is worth considerable attention.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

Have you noticed what a very strange world it is in which we live; not the natural world, of course, but the human part of it. One of my saddest outcomes from living a number of decades is to see how rapidly our culture has moved from one that faced realities and dealt with them, to one which uses every ruse and guise under the sun to avoid whatever issue it wishes to hide from. Nothing is objective any more; all is relative, and by dint of fiddle and ruse, excuse or even lack of it, the issue is sidestepped. Honesty is swept away, so it is small wonder that stability becomes non-existent.

Part of this *reduction ad absurdum* lies in the matter of faith and reality. These days, faith is a non-event unless you want it to be. Part of the stupidity lies in the proposition, so often supported by most that something is true if you want it to be. There is no need for evidence. There is need only for you to want something to be true. A wiser head than mine had made the observation that ‘when people give up believing in God, they do not believe in *nothing*: they believe in **anything**. And it shows.

Mind you, Christians have had their hand in this watering down of reality. Among some circles there remains that strange view that the more you are prepared to believe in the incredible, the more faithful you are. And that distortion had led oh! so many people off into a wilderness of their own making.

So what is faith? Surely the most instructive illustration comes from today’s Old Testament Lesson. Dear old Abram is the father of us all, and it is his experience that is so powerfully illustrative of what consists in faith. One needs to add that Sarai had to be part of the exercise as well, going along with what must have looked like a certain amount of idiocy.

It would be fairly certain that Abram, living where he originated, would have been a moon worshipper or something like that. From our distance in time it would not be all that hard to assume that his religion really did not meet him where he lived, did not satisfy him at any deep level, so he went looking for something better, more relevant and significant.

So perhaps the first point to grasp is that faith is a search, not in some never-never-land, but for something that makes sense, gives value and purpose to life, and will stand up to all sorts of tests and scrutinies. The outcome of this search must meet and deal with all the questions and curly ones of life, although it must be said that even the testing and questioning is a most important part of that search. In some ways, the goal becomes increasingly visible, and in others, factors may well lead to a change in direction or a variation of understanding.<sup>3</sup>

Into the context of what we are exploring this morning, comes a surprising insight from the Psalmist. So often the Psalms are very difficult to understand, but please catch sight of some things being said here. Here we have, not only the recognition of God as Creator, but also the view that this Creator looks for justice and ‘righteousness’ from His people. Please do see the ‘Creator’ thing as very much a statement that life and existence has meaning and value above and beyond the mere humanity of it all. Underline this with that really quite startling view that justice and integrity are ‘creational values,’ and you will see how far modern man has wandered from (Biblical) reality, and then see the monumental mess that such a wandering has resulted.

It is something of a challenge to have read in this Saturday’s (23.04.05) *Advertiser* that Muslims have great problems with Europe’s ‘Christian’ morality lapse, seeing it as a failure of the Faith. We may see it as a cultural issue; Muslims see it as a religious and spiritual one, and I am left suspecting that they are right!

Following the line of ‘faith,’ today’s Epistle may well be more than a little hard to follow, but it is underlining the reality of Abraham as the ‘father of us all.’<sup>4</sup> The objective of Paul’s argument is to show the

---

<sup>3</sup> One of the most tragic matters arising from Biblical understanding has been the failure to recognize that faith is a pilgrimage. So much of what early Scripture presents as a retributive God stems, not from reality but **from perceptions held at that time and later rejected**. The OT Prophets also show a growing perception of God, along precisely these lines.

<sup>4</sup> Oddly enough, that includes Muslims if you know your Bible well enough!

significance of faith, not as some holding to dogma, but of exploring to find where truth and reality lies. It is that which is pleasing to God, for it is that which the Lord seems to look for in us all.

Although these Readings for today make for extensive exploration, we may just as well pursue it to the 'bitter' end. Here in this mixture of a reading, we have a series of illustrations of faith. First of Matthew, then of the ruler, and finally of the poor, isolated lady. Perhaps enough has been said in the notes above, but do look at the breadth of picture that is offered here.

First Matthew, - not the nicest of character one might imagine. A tax collector was cordially hated by his countrymen, and it may have stemmed from Matthew's rejection by his mates when younger. Whatever, it would seem he chose a most unpopular path to prove his superiority. Wealth would have been seen as his answer to rejection. But it did not meet his hopes and expectations, and his search took him elsewhere. Abraham again, eh?

Please do not imagine that the ruler was demanding miracle. Here, rather, is the picture of a man whose love for his child (and a female one at that) led him to look to Jesus for whatever answers might be available. So did the other distressed lady in the cameo, who obviously considered that Jesus may well have some answers that no one else around appeared to have.

So faith, when one ponders it, is the preparedness to stick out one's neck and search; to go out on a limb to find out. There is never the slightest sense of faith being some sort of self-protection, although there is clearly a search for some certainty and direction.

All of this may well leave us to ponder quite somewhat whether our view of 'faith' is real and is heading in a valid direction.

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> June, 2005

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

**Sentence**

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.

*Romans 5:1 - 2*

**Collect**

All-powerful God, in Jesus Christ You turned death into life, and defeat into victory: increase our faith and trust in Him, that we may triumph over evil, in the strength of the same Jesus Christ our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Genesis 18: 1 –1 5**

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, "If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three bags of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread." Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

"Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

**PSALM**

**116:1- 2 & 11-18**

I love the Lord, because He heard my voice: the voice of my supplication  
Because He inclined His ear to me: in the day that I called to Him.

How shall I repay the Lord: for all His benefits to me?

I will take up the cup of salvation: and call upon the name of the Lord

I will pay my vows to the Lord: in the presence of all His people.

Grievous in the sight of the Lord: is the death of His faithful ones.

O Lord, I am Your servant, Your servant and the child of Your handmaid: You have loosed my bonds.

I will offer You a sacrifice of thanksgiving: and call upon the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows to the Lord: in the presence of all His people.

In the courts of the house of the Lord: even in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord

**EPISTLE**

**Romans 5: 1 – 11**

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, **we have peace** with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And **we rejoice** in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but **we also rejoice** in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we

have now received reconciliation.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

## GOSPEL

**Matthew 9:35-10:8**

*Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

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

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### OT LESSON

I am not at all sure why today's reading about Abraham and Sarah is connected with the rather more solemn aspects of the faith that are presented to us. Perhaps it is something of a matter of simply reminding us of some of the OT stories; perhaps it is a matter of reminding us that we can get somewhat amused at the impossibilities that God puts in front of us occasionally.

On the other hand, here is yet another powerful illustration of the way in which God tends to work with us. A common saying for most Aussies is 'when all else fails, read the instructions.' And here it is again. God, you will have noticed, is a God Who seems only to rescue His people when they manage to get into some inescapable corner. As it is here, so it was with the Exodus, the Exile, and the Cross. And I suspect that there will be many more situations in which we so-called faithful ones walk ourselves into some blind corner, and God will need to rescue us again.

Please note that when Israel thought 'salvation,' it did not think 'heaven,' but 'room to move, fullness of life, and freedom from slavery' *in the here and now*. We do well not to lose sight of that. Here is where we are living, and here we need to have valid and useful discipleship.

### PSALM

I have more than a sneaky suspicion that many present-day Christians tend to be somewhat unaware of the side effects of being faithful. Still others again have no idea because they may well have grasped a narrow Gospel rather than the complete one.

This Psalm has a rune of responses to God Who is faithful, with a repetition of 'paying my vows' – which may make more immediate connection with moderns if we talk about 'being grateful for all God is doing.' In a world and culture where loss of direction, all sorts of depressions and other very tragic maladies are rife, it is well to recall that this God of ours gives a sense of direction and purpose, a balanced view of self-worth, and all manner of capacities to overcome great difficulties.

### EPISTLE

*In the passage for the Epistle, I have emphasized a couple of phrases – you may not be aware that the alternative readings for 'we have peace' is 'let us have peace' – and likewise with the other two incidents. The point is that we are not talking automatic stuff, but the acceptance of an offer. Also there are significant ramifications and challenges that follow for such acceptance..*

In the light of what has been looked at in the OT Reading, it becomes easy to see that, in Christ, God was doing what He always did – and that rescuing people who had gone beyond their own capacity to rescue themselves. It is God Who reconciles, and then He calls on us to live that reconciliatory way. This is not simply to get people to heaven, for heaven's sake! It is because such a way of living is far, far more redemptive and creative than being at each others' throats.

I offer something that may well be resisted by some. Reference is made in this passage to the wrath of God. Very sadly, for many modern Christians<sup>5</sup> the concept of anger equals punishment, and that leads so many up so awful garden paths. God gives all people a choice: life worth living, redeemed, reconciled and caring – or the opposite of all that. The outcome of a false choice is certainly devastating, as you will notice from reading your daily newspapers.

You may possibly consider that these comments miss the point of the Epistle: my response is simply that, unless and until the Gospel is expressed in terms 'understandable by the ordinary person,' it will remain a foolish mystery to people around about us.

## GOSPEL

I would see today's Gospel underlining the comments that appear above. The profound concern of Jesus was to live the Gospel and to do it in terms that would 'ring bells' with people of that day and age and culture. In that instance it was a healing ministry, to be seen rather wider than miraculous stuff. (This for our benefit, of course.) When the New Testament talks about 'casting out demons' it was really a matter of dealing with issues that medical people of the day saw as completely beyond their capacity. I would draw your attention, for instance, to the healing of the demoniac who lived in the graveyard. I was delighted (if that is the right word) to read an article in St. Mark's Review, years ago, where the diagnosis for that poor damaged man was that people in his village had sexually abused him. That Jesus was not affronted by him was the point at which that man's healing began. What is stunning, in my view, is that Jesus asked that man to exercise his ministry in the very place of his damage. That would have been utterly difficult for everyone concerned, as the whole village would have had to work its way through what had been done, by whom, and who had remained silent. It would have been a terribly cathartic and redemptive experience for those people.

Then there is the list of the Twelve: interesting to note, it is, that there were no high and mighty people among those selected. One is left wondering why Simon (the political activist) was chosen, - and a possible reason is that Jesus offered a very different way of achieving Simon's ends. Judas may well have been offered a chance to look at life from a wider angle, a choice he did not take as events panned out.

What is even more stunning, from my perspective, is that so soon after their selection, Jesus sent them out to do a job, acting on the proposition no doubt, that the best way to learn is to teach.

## Notes for a sermon

There was a time, I confess, when the Epistle for today was one of my favourite passages. It was re-assurance of great power, reminding me of the fact that I was forgiven, accepted, and on my spiritual way. It remains a strong statement of the situation between God and me, but the focus has become much wider and far less ego-centric. That latter issue is the reason I have moved on from there a long time ago,

I find it both sad and rather annoying when people's vision of the Faith becomes limited to the focus on themselves and their eternal goal. I find that if ever I ask people, even some clergy, to see the Gospel in wider terms than eternal destiny, I am castigated as modernist, as repudiator of the Gospel, and even as the lowest form of human life. I find huge disappointment in the odd capacity of committed Christians to focus on a very narrow band of Christian revelation. On top of all that, one would have to say that such a myopic view of the Faith is the last thing that Paul would have had in mind, and certainly the last thing in Jesus' awareness.

---

<sup>5</sup> Even sadder still, the Good News Bible renders οργη -orge – as **anger**, and it is nothing of the sort. If one refuses God's love, then the only remaining choice is God's orge – where God gives them up, to use Paul's earlier phrase in Romans. God's orge is not punishment, but being allowed to go one's own way into meaninglessness. Did you know that the word translated 'hell' in the NT is 'gehenna' – the rubbish dump. Do you get the connection?

Now it is important to see the Epistle for today as enormously helpful and encouraging, but it also needs to be seen as a platform for action and a basis for living ..... here and now, in the real world.

Take a look at the Gospel, for instance. There was our Lord, facing the harsh reality for people around Him, and making a difference for them. Here. Now. Real world. Not waiting for heaven. If there is one thing that has tended to characterize the Church in general and Christians in particular, it is the strange capacity to remain blind to the real and potent issues for people around them. There is safety in the Faith, they seem to be saying. There is insulation from the real world, they seem to be living. SO there is small wonder that people outside the Church treat the rest of us as being with heads in the clouds.

Perhaps it needs to be said yet again: our Lord came to redeem the world, the real, harsh, gut-tearing world, and He did not come to offer an escape from reality. His life, death and resurrection was nothing if it was not a case of facing the realities and working His way right through them and out the other side. The atoning death of Jesus was not simply a means for you to be forgiven. It is a means for you to have a future ...*here and now*. And that same atonement and forgiveness, reconciliation process, is the only valid and effective way ANY reconciliation can work and any future open up.

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> June, 2005

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

**Sentence**

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus' sake, will find it.

*Matthew 10:39*

**Collect**

Almighty and everlasting God, You are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and give more than either we desire or deserve: pour down upon us the abundance of Your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our consciences are afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, save through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Genesis 21: 8 – 21**

The child Isaac grew and was weaned, and on the day he was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the desert of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there nearby, the boy began to sob. God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

**PSALM**

**86: 1 – 10, 16-17**

Incline your ear to me O God, and answer me: for I am poor and in misery  
 Preserve my life for I am faithful: my God, save Your servant who trusts in You  
 Be merciful to me, O Lord: for I call to You all the day long  
 O make glad the soul of Your servant: for I put my hope in You, O Lord.  
 For You, Lord, are good and forgiving: of great and continuing kindness to all who call upon You  
 Hear my prayer, O Lord: and give heed to the voice of my supplication.  
 In the day of my trouble I will call upon You: for You will surely answer  
 Among the gods there is none like You O Lord: nor are there any deeds like Yours.  
 All the nations You have made shall come and worship before You: O Lord, they shall glorify Your Name  
 For You are great and do marvelous things: and You alone are God.

Turn to me and be merciful, give Your strength to Your servant: and save the son of Your handmaid.  
 Show me some token of Your goodness: that those who hate me may see it and be ashamed, because You, O Lord,  
 are my helper and my comforter

**EPISTLE**

**Romans 6: 1 – 11**

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we

died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

## GOSPEL

**Matthew 10: 24 – 39**

### *Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

*Jesus said* “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn *‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’*<sup>6</sup>

Anyone who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

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

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

### **Old Testament Lesson**

When I first read this passage, with any knowledge of history, it struck me as particularly harsh. In this incident lies, one suspects, much of the commencement of the tensions and hatreds between Jews and Arabs. I find it strange that, according to the story, God should have sanctioned Sarah's assessment of the situation. However, there it is, obviously the perception of the author of this passage, and the reality is that we still live in the light and pain of that isolation right up to the present.

About the only real lesson I can learn from this saga is that God remains protector even of those His people cast out. There is also the fact that life is sprinkled with hard decisions, and that one needs to be aware of the fact that a careless decision can have continual and enormous ramifications. The wise person stops to think those things through before carrying decisions through.

## PSALM

As I read this Psalm, after looking at that Old Testament Lesson, it strikes me that it could well have been Hagar who could have expressed such sentiments. On the other hand it may be sufficient to note that it will often be the case that those who remain loyal to God, in a world that forgets or ignore Him, will encounter such a sense of isolation and ostracism.

In such situations, perhaps one of the only means of support remaining is that God remains sure and certain, in a world that seems to offer nothing of that certainty.

## EPISTLE

I have read, and tried to operate on the basis of quite some devotional material apparently based on today's Epistle, and it may be a measure of my lack of faith that I report finding such stuff unhelpful. What's more, I tend to consider it misses the point altogether. Paul was not ranging off into the devotional area when writing this, but rather being intensely practical.

---

<sup>6</sup> Some readers may be unaware that these words are not Jesus' own – He was quoting from Micah 7: 6 – which may come as some surprise.

As mentioned above, the Biblical Faith is nothing if not down to earth. And what is constantly studied and talked about is the contrast between what we may call ordinary human behaviour and what should be that of Christians. It is not a matter of polite 'holiness' in the conventional sense, but rather a very different base from which Christians (should) operate. The contrast is often expressed in terms of death and life, of dark and light, of Adam and Christ.

As we have discussed elsewhere (Palm Sunday Epistle) in Adam we humans operate from the proposition that the real God is dead and I am in His place. All that stems from that basis is sin, because it is destructive. The alternative, is that offered in Christ. This involves the acceptance of the real God, and the modus operandum of being servant, like Jesus. It involves being conciliatory, like Jesus. Holiness, in the Biblical sense is not a matter of isolationist purity, like the Pharisees used to be. Holiness is being different, operating on that different wave-length as Jesus did. It is being *whole, holistic* - to use a current in-word.

A close look at Jesus' approach to people in physical and mental need will indicate quite something of this holistic approach – which allows people to grow and move at their own pace.

## GOSPEL

Never lose sight of the extent to which all that Jesus said, taught and did was and remains radical. It was always the case that either you chose to follow Him without reserve or looking back, or you decided that it was all too much and gave it away. Our Lord was always very aware of the fact that the Gospel He came to bring would look like threat long before it was seen as promise. This is because so much of the Judaic-Christian Faith runs very much against the stream of usual human thinking and acting.

So there is urgency and a need for very clear choices and emphases. On the other hand, Jesus made it quite clear that while there will be contrary pressure to recant from following Him, that the time will come eventually when those who oppose you will see the folly of their ways. Even if they do not, you still have the awareness of certainty that Jesus remains on the right track.

*Your attention is drawn to the footnote (no 4.) where the type is italic and dark – it was Micah who first wrote those words, which indicates quite clearly that the Old Testament prophets understood clearly that to follow God may well mean isolation from most others, but that that did not make them correct. It is the truth one must adhere to, not popularity.*

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

You can call me a cynic and you may well be right, but I have great difficulty when people, believers or not, assume that life should go along all so very nicely and without rumble. Should a hard situation arise or a difficult choice face them, their horror is enormous and their retreat complete.

One of the important things that many modern Christians miss is the sight of harsh reality about life that is embedded in the Biblical revelation. There is no shying away from the hard bits, but rather the seeing of it all as part of life's tapestry. 'Why does God permit evil?' It is about as sensible a question to ask as why is there dark instead of all light. The value of one is recognized by the presence of the other. And it is the only way in which serious choice is possible in a serious and therefore valuable experience. I suspect that, if all were sweetness and light, the most obvious outcome would be ennui.

The things that brought this line of thought are today's Readings, an interesting selection if ever there was one. That very tragic scene with Hagar and Esau is heart-rending to say the least, and underlines the huge difficulty in making choices and determining directions. The general assumption that there must be a soft landing for everyone is an attempt to escape from reality.

And then there are the very strong words of Epistle and Gospel. In each case, the need for solid and determined choice is abundantly clear, and refusal to make such choices will often lead to disastrous outcomes.

You will have encountered the person who hovers between discipleship and turning away. You will have encountered the person who wants to be part of everything and yet somehow finishes up doing nothing – because this interferes with that and vice versa. You have a Lord Who will have none of that, because that also leads to disaster or demolition.

When I discovered, some years ago, that Jesus was quoting from Micah when He talked about ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household,’ it came as a great shock. In fact this whole passage may well seem to some people to be so out of step with the rest of the Gospels. However, Jesus was very painfully aware of the sad capacity for human beings to come down on the side they consider either the strongest or the safest. In such a situation, truth is the first casualty, and when that occurs, the only outcome can ever be chaos. Look at any time and place in history and see if this is so or not.

So what Jesus was looking for, perhaps even demanding, was a grasp of discipleship that put life’s realities first, and safety at the very end of the list. Consider the story of Jesus’ arrest, trials, and crucifixion, and see that there were remarkably few people who came out of it all with any credibility at all. *And most of them were the women.*

I imagine that one could tell all sorts of stories to illustrate the point. I suspect that this would be unnecessary, for the moment this issue of loyalty to the truth hits air-space, each of us are pounded somewhat by memories of when we failed. No point breast-beating about those incidents. The only point is to learn from them and grow stronger, more determined, and loyal.

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2005

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

**Sentence**

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*Romans 6:23*

**Collect**

O God, Your Son has taught us that those who give even a cup of cold water in His name will not lose their reward: open our eyes to the needs of Your children, and in all things make us obedient to Your will, so that in faith we may receive Your gracious gift, eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Genesis 22:1 – 14**

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram behind him caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

**PSALM**

**13**

How long O Lord, will You so utterly forget me: how long will You hide Your face from me?

How long must I suffer anguish in my soul, and be so grieved in my heart day and night: how long shall my enemy triumph over me?

Look upon me, O Lord my God, and answer me: lighten my eyes lest I sleep in death

Lest me enemies say 'I have prevailed': lest me foes exult at my overthrow.

Yet I will put my trust in Your unfailing love: O let my heart rejoice in Your salvation.

And I will make my song to the Lord: because He deals so bountifully with me

**EPISTLE**

**Romans 6: 12 – 23**

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is

eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

*This is the Word of the Lord      Thanks be to God*

## GOSPEL

**Matthew 10: 40 – 42**

*Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

*Jesus said* “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”

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

## NOTES ON THE READINGS

So well known is that ancient tale in the OT Lesson that it hardly requires any comment. People my age cut their teeth on these sagas at Sunday School and elsewhere, and the comparison between Abraham and God, both giving up their only sons, echoes over the years.

For anyone for whom this tale is new, there may be some surprise. It has to be said that Abraham, at this stage in his life, was not all that far removed from when child sacrifice was part of his culture. Even if that were so, the challenge to sacrifice what amounted to his family and tribal future would have been immense. On the other hand, as we have been seeing in recent Sundays, one of the recurrent features of God’s dealing with people has been this business of bringing people back from all sorts of brinks. This is the nature of God’s activity with us. All of us.

Both Abraham’s preparedness to go to such an extreme and the remarkable provision of a substitute bear the marks of gospel before the Gospel, do they not?

## PSALM

Another of the recurrent features at least through the Old Testament is the perception that people could seem to cope with being ground into the dirt as long as they had some assurance that God would vindicate them – show them to be in the right and their opponents in the wrong. Although it may be a risky statement to make, it would seem to me that here lies not so much an effort of self-justification, but rather a longing that somewhere, somehow, even the greatest opponent to truth will be led to see where the truth lies.

If you consider even that to be unworthy, I take you into an often-referred-to aspect of life today, when young people suicide because they cannot see any possibility of reality surfacing, any sort of sensible values being exhibited for them. Hope for the future needs something substantial in the way of evidence; hope that is baseless is a contradiction in terms.

## EPISTLE

Over recent months, I have been spending time with a prisoner in the local gaol. This young man has been incarcerated for a very long period of time, for – in his own terms – seeking his goals. Of necessity, the goals he set himself required his to live in the fast lane, a budding but fast flowering criminal life. In spite of a fairly real Christian background, he turned his back on all that, and became slave to his goals. He knows now how readily all that leads to death, spiritual *and* physical. He has a lot of years in front of him to rue his selfish and dangerous choices, and he knows

The ‘normal’ Christian may well have some difficulty coping with the thought that someone connected with the faith could even consider operating as this bloke had, but those are the sheerly human realities. Let it be noted that most of us so-called committed Christians are quite capable of stepping into the mire, even if only for short spells. It is – as mentioned in previous notes – important to see clearly that the Gospel of Christ is a choice of lifestyle, to revoke the Adamic choice, and to embrace the Christ pattern.

## GOSPEL

It is a short and perhaps confusing passage for today's Gospel, but the reality is quite simple. Jesus is here encouraging His followers to operate on the same wavelength of service, which enables one to recognize the basic realities rather easier than someone who big-notes himself or herself. If I am a follower of truth, I am more likely to recognize it in someone else, am I not?

All of the above seems – to me at least – to be enough to go on with, for it certainly strikes us right at the very root of our being. And let's face it, it is the sort of challenge we all need in these troublous and disconnected times.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It has been an interesting several weeks as the old Abraham sagas are presented to us, together with the sorts of passages from Romans – for these were the stuff of which the Reformation and its passion was made. It would be rather too easy to become bogged down in Christian history and its somewhat narrow divides, but there is far too much of that still. Only a year or so ago in this fair city, the old and long-settled issues were used to plunge knives into Christian fellowship. SO we will not travel along that path.

What strikes me as ever hugely relevant for the Christian of whatever age is the need to look at the real and powerful issues of the present that require both individuals and the Church to look closely, ponder carefully and decide with all the honesty and integrity available.

That is a very strong image of the challenge placed in front of Abraham. On the one hand there would have been the sense of compulsion to head in what seemed to be the divine direction, and yet to have followed that path would have meant the end of the promise of any 'great nation.' There would, almost certainly, have been convictions dragging him in opposing directions. His old and pagan religion was, apparently, quite inured to the process of child-sacrifice, being seen as part of that process that humans needed to follow to ensure that the gods responded to the human demands. That was ever, and remains<sup>7</sup> the expectation of much of populist spirituality, and the faithful one (as always) needs the wit and wisdom to separate 'popular' views from reality.

It would seem to me that this is the issue here, from each of the Readings for today. Put at its most simple – and most penetrating, it calls for people to be 'wise as serpents and as harmless as doves,' to work out where the truth and reality of any given situation lies. Once that position has become clear, there still remains the question of the believer's capacity to remain steadfast to the truth, and not to surrender to pressure to move away from there.

It is my conviction that this is exactly what Paul is arguing for in today's passage from Romans. We do have an almost innate tendency to see 'sin' in terms of what it does to my pretty little soul. Paul's problem, as well as Jesus' had more to do with the damage caused to people and situations by the sheer human capacity to take the easy path and ignore the likely outcomes. If you want a clear illustration of the process, watch politicians fudge and fiddle with the realities, in order to retain their votes and seats. Certainly, it has to be said that 'politics is the art of the possible' and bending and compromising is almost built in to the nature of the process. Some of this may be helpful, but, as in war, the first casualty tends to be the truth

Surely this is where the challenge lies. One can tell all sorts of stories of how the failure to follow this path leads to all manner of collapse and destruction, and demeaning of people. It is not the most popular of paths, (though most people give it lip-service) and yet it is the point at which Christians and the rest of the community may well part company.

---

<sup>7</sup> Much of the New Age stuff is really little more than a regurgitation of the ancient earth mother and fertility perceptions, which consisted (largely) in the fulfillment of rituals that meant that the gods were bound to respond in whatever way the ritual demanded of them. In other words, the gods were there for human manipulation – a very far cry from the then-developing Hebrew faith which turned such ideas on their heads.