

**Sentence**

Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can it be seasoned? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

*Mark 9:50*

**Collect**

O God, You declare Your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant us such a measure of Your grace that, running the way of Your commandments, we may obtain Your gracious promises, and be made partakers of Your heavenly treasure, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Esther 7:1 –10 & 9:20-22**

**Psalm**

**124**

**Epistle**

**James 5: 12 – 20**

**Gospel**

**Mark 9: 38 – 50**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

*If ever you have wondered, the OT reading today, of Esther and her battle with Haman, is still celebrated annually by Jewish folk as the Feast of Purim. This remarkable tale of evil versus good, and the part played in it by a remarkable Jewish lady, still has quite something of a thrill attached to it. While such an outcome is rare, the bravery of Esther has to be celebrated.*

**Old Testament Lesson**

I am often left wondering at the strong resistance still of Christians and Church and women in positions of leadership and whatever. Although there was never any great yells and screams about the matter, there are enough tales in OT and New to indicate that, in spite of much of the cultural hang-ups about women, God seemed ever ready to see them involved in the ordinary life and history of Israel. It seems to me that, just as Jesus was quite different to the culture of His own time, and was happy to have women involved in all sorts of things. There should never have been the kerfuffle of recent decades on this issue.

While on the subject, readers should never lose sight of the fact that, in her appeal to the King, Esther ran the enormous risk of losing her own life by daring to raise the issue of Jewish suppression. Daring to raise any issue! It is one thing to admire the actions of such singular people; it is another thing indeed to stand up and be counted.

**Psalm**

It continues to surprise me to find the extent to which committed and enthusiastic Christians tend to see the Gospel in terms no wider than getting them to Heaven. From its earlier beginnings, the Judaic-Christian Faith has presented as a response to life here and now, and a way of life designed to remove the chaos and evil and to restore truth and integrity.

Here the Psalmist rejoiced in the experience of rescue from evil, which is another way of saying exposure of evil. In Biblical terms, evil is overcome *when it is seen for what it is*.

**Epistle**

Before your view of this passage becomes limited to the specific and literal items to which James refers, please stop a moment and see how he was encouraging an openness and honesty between people of faith. It my yes means yes, then others can rely on it. If I say one thing and do another, then people do not know where they are and are not likely to take my word on any matter. On the other hand, it has to be said that, some decades ago, there was a movement that encouraged confession of sins to each other. It led to enormous breakdowns ad some people took advantage of the stories they were told, and others were demeaned because of such confessions. It is a very risky path to travel, because it would depend utterly on the capacity of people to be fully careful of other people's secrets. I could never encourage anyone to head in such a direction.

On the other hand, that ministry to people that will bring someone back 'into the fold' is a delicate and life-giving one.

## Gospel

There is a distinct lack of recognition, these days, for people of other views and perceptions. In fact, Christian history is shot through with the total incapacity of one group of Christians being prepared to recognize the value of another. Jesus never seemed to have such difficulties, and nor should we. It runs contrary to Jesus' ministry and Gospel to stand in harsh judgement of others.

That has to do, not only with views, but also of practices. It is ever surprising to find the extent to which Jesus offered His *imprimatur* to some ministries we may consider quite minor. A cup of cold water is hardly an expensive or complex gift, but depending on the situation, it can be a life-changing thing indeed.

Just as small gifts can have remarkable outcomes, so can the opposite be the case when our actions and attitudes are under review. Whilst the sentiment expressed here may seem rather severe, and the need for discipline run contrary to much of today's general mores, the truth remains so: my misbehaviour can have enormous repercussions on other people, and I need to operate in the light of that fact.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I remember reading, quite some years ago, of the simple action of an Anglican priest in South Africa. My memory of the story is not sufficient to name the person, but a young black lad told later of how it impressed him when said priest doffed his hat and greeted a black mother and her son. No white person had ever even acknowledged their existence before, and the young man was greatly moved. He later became an Anglican priest himself, and you will know him as Archbishop Desmond Tutu. So small an action had a remarkable outcome, after the passage of quite some years. The original giver of that recognition may never have known anything of what he had done.

We live in a world where it is the flamboyant and obvious donor or actor who gains all the attention. And we tend to be somewhat led astray by that attitude. Not so with Jesus. His approach was ever low-key, for the very reason that such an approach is far more valid. Also it is less likely to promote self-indulgence in the giver.

Today's Readings offer a series of comments about the valued action of people simply remarkable. Before you comment that Esther was Queen, stop and realize that queens then had as little oomph as their namesakes today. They were there because of their beauty, not their brains, and please do not see that as some sort of sexist comment. That was the way things were. I am simply painting the picture of the enormous bravery of Esther, who in that action ran the risk of losing her life for daring to raise issues of State. My comment enhances Esther's action; it does not denigrate it.

On the other hand, we do live in a culture and climate of spin and misleading statements. Whether it is in advertising, or in buying and selling, it really is a case of *buyer beware* - there is likely to be a vast gulf between the 'facts' as presented and the reality itself. I suspect that even the present fad of 'Reality TV' is in fact far removed from reality. Others may disagree.

The point of spin is really to provide confusion, to mislead and hide from the truth, and that has enormous repercussions on those who take spin-doctors at their word. And it is the damage that ensues that is the real concern. People are led up garden paths, people are taken down for whatever wealth they may have, and all sorts of side-issues can tend to emerge from such treatment.

So it is small wonder that people like James, and our Lord Himself, focus on the need to be utterly honest with each other. It may not be the most popular course of action, but it is far less damaging and far more constructive. Relationships can blossom, as trust becomes well-founded. On top of that, there may well be a rather reduced gap between haves and have-nots.

Finally, there is the trend these days for people to Big Note themselves by making sure that others have been well and truly advised of their apparent generosity - when that may not have been the case at all. Even if it is so, the old Biblical injunction of not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing makes for a far more modest approach to things, and reduces the likelihood of false big-noting. It is all so unnecessary and giving needs to be giving, not a matter of making waves.

The message this Sunday really is quite simple and straightforward, even if it may be unpopular. But there are good and solid reasons for that old approach.

**Sentence**

Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child, will never enter it.

*Mark 10:15*

**Collect**

Generous God, Whose Hand is open to fill all things living with plenteousness; make us ever thankful for Your goodness, and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of Your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Job 1:1 & 2:1-10**

**Psalm**

**26**

**Epistle**

**Hebrews 1:1-4 & 2:5 – 12**

**Gospel**

**Mark 10: 2 – 16**

**Notes on the readings**

**Old Testament Lesson**

One of the OT books that has left a lasting impression on me has been this Book of Job. It is rather difficult even to begin to date the book, but the issue it faces and attempts to resolve is one that is as old as humankind: why is it that good people suffer without any apparent just cause, or that nasty things happen to good people.

Perhaps modern people do not take the time to read and ponder this rather ancient tome, but the struggle is worth it. Interestingly, it faces the then (and even now!) rather traditional response, and finds it falls far short of reality. There is no final answer given to the question, except that in a rather lovely Jewish way it tells of the enormous growth of understanding of God that Job attains because he asks the very hard question. *And is not satisfied with pious nonsense.*

Some moderns become somewhat fixed on the reference to Satan, and go off into rather useless tangents. That mention, as always, is the typical Hebrew way of pointing up the fact that evil, of whatever source, is being put under the microscope.

**Psalm**

The Psalm today is asking the very similar question: exploring the situation where a person of integrity has to face bombardment from peers, in a world where the solid old values are disregarded. It is often rather difficult for anyone to retain their integrity – as he puts it – in the face of contrary pressure. However, this person was determined to remain true, in spite of pressure otherwise.

**Epistle**

The author of this Epistle presents a very high view of Jesus, and goes to great detail to establish his point. There is no-one but God Himself higher, he seems to be saying, and yet even this Son is not exempted from the power struggles and pressure to fail that is common to humans. That is perhaps the most stunning statement of all – most people of ‘high estate’ tend to assume that they are far above the pressure of mere ordinary mortals. Jesus does not.

**Gospel**

It seems to me to be far too easy and trite to lapse into the view of taking Jesus’ words on marriage and divorce and turn them into rules. What the entire passage is focussing on, seems to me, is the necessity of all of us, in whatever situation, to take each other very seriously as human beings. Divorce, particularly these days, is the illustration *par excellence*, of reducing other people to the situation of mere cogs for our own personal machine. Jesus, like Moses, was well aware of the failure of marriages, for whatever reason, but the point that Jesus was making is the necessity of valuing the human being. People are more important than marriage, and not the other way around.

As if to underline the ‘person’ thing rather than ‘rule,’ Jesus then went on with that remarkable comment He made about children. The general idea is that children have a more open and honest approach to life, only learning to prevaricate from their “elders and betters.” Kids do tend to have a rather heightened sense of what is fair, true and just. And that is the point.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is almost enough to focus on that rather fascinating Old Testament Reading and look no further, really. It is one that many Christians either miss, or are not aware of, or know it only by repute. And that is a pity; old this book may be, but the message is both current and coherent.

I remember having, during my years of training for the priesthood, a challenge from an Uncle of mine who – in rather typical farmer fashion, - failed to do anything about a nasty ulcer in his mouth. He left it far too long,. And it became cancerous (or perhaps always was) and would take his life in his mid-50s. As he was being treated in a Sydney hospital, he decided that this budding clergyman should have all the answers as to why such things happen to people. If God is good and loving, then why ?????/ And there are no easy answers.

In our search together, Uncle and I focussed on the Book of Job, and by the time of the end of our exploration I had quite a number of commentaries and other shorter works on the subject. It is not easy to follow the arguments in that book, but patience and thought will be rewarded. As the story unfolds, it took poor old Job a lot of 'blood, sweat and tears' to reach an answer that, in some way, was no answer at all.

One of the usual perceptions amongst some Christians, even to this day, is that illness is the result of sin, usually personal sin. In spite of enough Biblical evidence to the contrary, that folk-view retains quite some loyalty. (Mind you, the Book of Common Prayer, in its Visitation of the Sick, emphasises that view quite unashamedly. I often wonder why, as Jesus made it perfectly clear (John 9) that such is not the case. So if it is not, what is the answer to the question 'why?')

If you go on to read the whole story, do not be put off by that rather odd reference to Satan spreading himself thin around the world. This is a parable, a myth if you dare, and the book does nothing other than express the usual Hebrew thing about Satan, that here is a sort of personification of human capacity for evil. In this whole issue shows up what is seen to be the huge struggle between good and evil. And evil such unexpected and unexplained things certainly seem to be.

Those who were Job's maligned 'comforters' were convinced of that ancient furbury, and with what amounted to some glee, pounded Job to confess what they expected to be some hideous and secret sin. As is often the case, with pious friends, their friendship is denied by their piety, or pretence of it. It is helpful to find, towards the end of the tale, that they get their come-uppance, in terms of stringent criticism from God Himself. Comforters they were not.

I find it fascinating that, so early in Biblical history, this terribly regular human dilemma came in for examination and treatment. Part of the genius of Jewish faith has always been its capacity to see God at work in ordinary life, without the slightest recourse to 'going off with the fairies.' God can be seen, even in a shadowy way sometimes, though what goes on in real and ordinary life. So the questioning was part of a perfectly legitimate search.

Job would have been as aware as you that he was far from perfect, and his protestations of innocence are not to be thought of as his statement of his personal purity. He was aware of his imperfections and sins, but he also knew that there was nothing in his life and background that could have justified such a savage series of losses and ailments. Nothing made sense, and yet Job knew enough about God to know that – in the final analysis – sense had to be there somewhere. So there is no stoicism in Job; just the search for answers that stand up.

Far be it from me to go through all the exhausting and exhaustive arguments, discussions and debates that occupy the greater part of the book. The powerful climax commences with Chapter 38, where Job, after having run out of words to say and complaints to make, is silenced by the answer he received from God. There is no reference whatever to Job's actual problem, but rather the setting of perspectives, so to speak, and the pounding reminder to Job that he is not God but one of God's creatures. This is no putdown, but a means of almost forcing Job to get his perspectives correct. In that Divine tirade the Lord pointed to all manner of conundrums and such in life and in nature. In pounding challenge after pounding challenge, Job is left with his mouth open and his heart wrung dry. So powerful is this enormous debate that the only result that could possibly emerge is that described in Job's own words – stunning in its simplicity and yet of huge implication for Job and for anyone who ever follows him. Listen to 42: 4: *You said, Lord, listen now and I shall question you.* And Job's reply comes: ***My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes see You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.***

The remarkable end to the story does not, as mentioned above, provide the answer 'why.?' What does happen is that through that most bitter of experiences, Job moved from knowing about God, to know Him. From theory to reality. And if God was there in it somehow, that was sufficient encouragement for poor old Job. It was a very steep and painful learning curve, for Job. And that is the point. No learning curve = No discovery.

This story packs an enormous punch for us even these days, when medical science has progressed as far as it has. Perhaps the biggest lesson for Uncle and me was precisely that search into the nature of God of Whom we knew something, but went on to discover far, far more.

**Sentence**

No one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children for Jesus' sake will not receive an hundredfold now in this age, with persecutions, and in the age to come, eternal life. *Mark 10:29-30*

**Collect**

Almighty God, in Your wisdom You have so ordered our earthly life that we must walk by faith and not by sight: give us such trust in Your fatherly care that, in the face of all perplexities, we may give proof of our faith by the courage of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Job 23: 1--17**

**Psalm**

**22:1-15**

**Epistle**

**Hebrews 4: 12 – 16**

**Gospel**

**Mark 10:17 – 31**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

*Before we even start, it may be worth stopping to look at a couple of these readings which focus on issues of hardship and strife, and the apparent silence of God in the face of it all. Before you consider that the authors are indulging in self-pity, do stop to realize that they are finding a way of coping with that apparent lack of Divine support. Imagine Jesus, if you will, at the time at the Cross when He was quoting today's Psalm. It is a he issue: if God is God, why then the apparent victory of evil over good? It is a question left begging by some, but not Scripture and its authors.*

**Old Testament**

As discussed last week, this book of Job deals with the huge human problem of what may be called undeserved suffering. This is a passionate book, going right to the heart of the question, and dealing with the issue with complete honesty.

In this passage, Job was facing the fact that his 'comforters' followed the then-current view that nasty things happen to nasty people, and that the former proves the latter. It is never a pleasant thing to bump up against people's rigid orthodoxy; it was not so then, and it remains so today. If a person's convictions – based on quite sound evidence – run against that orthodoxy, there is the double whammy of knowing there is more to the issue – and that no one is at all supportive of the patient.

The problem seems to be with God; the reality is that the problem is more human. Add to that the fact that God appears totally silent, and Job's dilemma is complete. However, he remains convinced of the validity of his cause. Alongside that is the conviction of the justice and compassion of God, even if no one else can see it. Full marks to Job for hanging in there against such pathetic and narrow 'comforters.' With friends like that, who needs enemies?

**Psalm**

Here, too, is passionate writing, from the pen of someone who has scraped the bottom of the barrel. It is interesting to note that Jesus quoted this Psalm at the devastation of the Cross. Here is no self-pity, but rather the powerful sense of being alone, ostracised and disregarded, even when one is convinced of the truth and validity of what is going on.

It strikes me that people find it far easier to listen to the crowd, and become bitter, rather than listen to what they know to be the truth, and persist. Sooner or later, there will be some who will change sides. In the interim, there is the increasing conviction that, in spite of evidence to the contrary, God is still there and on their side.

**Epistle**

This is a sinful world in which we live, and none of us are exempt from either sin or the effects of sin. Or both. So this brief passage from Hebrews should come as enormous encouragement if you are going through 'the valley of the shadow.' On the one hand there is the strong reminder that *truth* is the constant of God and behind the universe. Sooner or later, that becomes evident even to those who might deny it.

On the other hand, even the Lord Himself was not exempt from the angst and strain of ‘swimming against the stream.’ Not even His divinity allowed Him to avoid the strain and struggle of having to live out the truth right in the mist of falsehood and evil. So when we are in the ‘pooh,’ we can be reminded of our Lord Who is right there in it with us. It makes it no easier, but it does offer strong confirmation, and that is great help.

## Gospel

I am bemused constantly by those antagonists to the Faith who tend to think that people believe in Jesus in order to avoid the harsh realities of life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Here is no easy panacea or flip-flop way out. Rather, the Faith is a means of dealing with, facing and going through the difficulties and struggles. We have a Lord Who has been this way before us.

That rich man is to be pitied in a way. What he really wanted was to have a foot in both camps, so to speak. To use another simile, he wanted his cake and to eat it too. There are no such middle courses in discipleship. Not real ones anyhow.

Nor was it much comfort to the Twelve, who – as they said quite rightly – had given up much to follow Christ. Their difficulty was in trying to hold that up as some sort of badge or medal to show their superiority over other lesser mortals. Jesus quietly put them in their place, too. Just as Job had his struggles with reality, so does the disciple, that day or this. There is no room for baloney; no room for spin or falsity. Either you are in it up to your neck, or you might as well step off Jesus’ bandwagon.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

I imagine that there are still some people who see Christianity as an escape from the harsh realities of life. I do find that some modern hymns express such twee perceptions, but it also must be said that there is little in the way of encouragement for such views to be found in Scripture itself.

So – yes, - I do get cross at outsiders who are sarcastic about Christians not being real, and trying to escape from here and now into some hoped for heaven. Little could be further from the Biblical truth.

Perhaps it is because of unfamiliarity with the wide range of Scripture that some present-day Christians miss the point. We are alive here and now, and as people have found from the beginning of time, there are those who are always ready and willing to follow or offer the evil alternative, ready to create havoc in all manner of ways. On top of that, it has to be said that quite some aspects of life itself offer conundrums of huge proportion, leaving one to wonder if chaos or order lies at the heart of things. So the Faith is a struggle, and a struggle to find answers to perplexing questions.

I find it quite sad when people have been unready or unwilling to even consider the questions of life, because there may be no answer, or perhaps because the answer may be unpalatable. Surely it makes rather more sense to search for and discover the truth, than it is to remain in darkness. If that latter had been the case, we all would, as the saying goes, still be living in caves. Some Christians still find ‘science’ to be the ogre, which strikes me as silly and short-sighted. Remember back a century or so when the Church pontificated against some of the theories of Charles Darwin. ‘Rather come from angels than monkeys’ the Church thundered, and because of that, failed to see where the challenge to their orthodoxy got them – to a far more significant understanding of Genesis. (Mind you, what was even more silly is that, had Christians bothered to consult Jews about *their* Scriptures, such a contest would have been averted, because they would have understood the old stories as myth and legend – damn good myth and legend I might add – rather than fact.

As today’s readings present the tales of people who **did** face the harsh realities of life, it strikes me as important that we do the exploring ourselves, into our own perplexities. It can be only fear of a supposed outcome that hinders us from sticking our necks out. That would like an uncle referred to last week who refused to check out a painful ailment lest it be shown to be the Big C. Failure to check it out led to defeat from the very thing he feared most. Such an approach is hardly very sensible.

What I have long encouraged people to do is to search for their answers. To search for the truth or otherwise of the Faith that we profess. It may sound a little strange to say, but if this Faith is a whole lot of baloney, then the sooner we find out the better. There is small point or purpose in building castles in the air.

**Sentence**

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many  
*Mark 10:45*

**Collect**

God of unchangeable power, when the heavens and earth were made, the morning stars sang together and the host of heaven shouted for joy; open our eyes to the wonder of creation, and teach us to use all things for good, to the honour of Your Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Job 38:1- 38 (part)**

**Psalm**

**104:1-10 & 26**

**Epistle**

**Hebrews 5:1-10**

**Gospel**

**Mark 10:35 – 45**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

*If you wish to have some sort of focus on this group of readings, then I suspect the OT Lesson gives the clue. It seems to me that in this passage Job was put somewhat severely in his place. However the real thing is that the experience for Job must have been what moderns like to call ‘a reality check.’ We humans do go off with the fairies every now and then. Assuming that all the cards should fall our way! (Are we not the centre of the universe?) And that is a bubble needing to be pricked. The Faith is nothing if it is not down to earth.*

Melchizedek This person was ‘King of Salem’ at the time of Abraham, (Gen 14:18ff) to whom Abraham offered a tithe of all his booty after the defeat of Chedorlaomer. Melchizedek was seen as priest of the Most High God, and so when David conquered Jerusalem and set it up as his capital, he also assumed the role of the ancient. See also the connection in Psalm 110:4. The ancient king was seen to have neither antecedents or future line, taken over as it was by David as Messiah and then Jesus as the greater Messiah.

**Old Testament Lesson**

As the huge debate in this book comes to a close, the Lord Who had remained silent up to now offers quite something of a learning curve to Job. Spelt out in simple terms, this was a matter of taking the rug out from under Job. Reality check.

Job is not the centre of the universe, but needs to see that he is creature not Creator. As Job is confronted with his real position he is left holding his hand across his mouth so to speak. It is a stunning series of pounding challenges, and poor old Job is left without answers. Who the hell do you think you are, Job? And yet only when Job faced that reality did he begin to move towards greatness. Mind you, that is greatness in the Biblical sense.

**Psalm**

Jews seem to have had no interest in what we call scientific issues, but were fascinated by the natural world. They understood everything as coming to them from the hand of God, and that affected the way they looked at life and events. The fifth verse, surely, has its implications for the way we consider the imagery of Pentecost in Acts 2. This Psalm is, also, a reflection of the effect of the Flood story on Israel’s view of the world.

**Epistle**

As we saw and understood last week, the author of the letter to the Hebrews was most aware both of the fragile human priesthood, as well as the total involvement of Jesus both in that priesthood and in that fragility. Again the author emphasised the fact that Jesus was as vulnerable to His humanity as all others. Comments above are designed to offer some insight on Melchizedek for anyone who is not clear about it.

**Gospel**

It is interesting, to my mind at least, to compare and contrast the picture of Job against the demand of the disciples. Both have the mickey taken out of them, and both for very constructive reasons. There is that terrible tendency of humans to demand superiority over all others, and that (see comments from way back in this series) follows the Adamic path. Power and control is the path to disaster for everyone. The path to service of others is the

only direction to head, if resolution of conflicts and relationships is to be found. This lies at the very core of the Gospel.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It may be a case of me getting old and impatient, or simply am looking back somewhat longingly at a distant but more comfortable past. This little indulgence in nostalgia is more than that: and it stems from the observation of life over the past five or six decades, watching the insidious and powerful emergence of the cult of self. Perhaps it began with film stars and the like who were offered enormous salaries, and lived the life-style that 'befitted' them. As time passed, this insidious disease seemed to infect more and more people, This cult of the self was not presented as that: it had names such as assertiveness. It was promoted by TV adverts assuring each of us that we were, individually, the 'most important person in the world. So company executives demanded obscene salaries and perks, honesty went out of the window as people were elbowed out of the way, and then kids became masters or mistresses of their own destiny and let's not have parents DARE to have a say in anything.

It is all rather heady stuff, on the surface at least. But the damage becomes first immense and then irreversible, and it becomes a matter of survival of the fittest. In my particular field of endeavour, I have become increasingly appalled as clergy demanded the same respect and remuneration as people in similar positions in the community. Managerial skills were taken on board, and person skills abandoned increasingly. The real problem, from the perspective of this old time priest is that the Servant role established by and illustrated in the life of Jesus has been discarded as passé, old hat, and simply for the birds. I find that amounts to a denial of the Gospel. Full stop. Small wonder that all sorts of abuse of people and community have become evident in that distortion of the truth.

So as I look at this passage from Job, I catch sight of the person at the centre of the book having his feet firmly and not all that lovingly put back on *terra firma*. In a not all that gentle response from God, in this fascinating book, Job is required (for asked is too meagre a word,) to get real. Even on the personal level, it is very easy to be so surrounded with the pathos of one's situation to stop looking at the wider picture. (For any reader prepared to read through the entire response of God to Job in this book, you will find all sorts of interesting and odd realities of life mentioned, along with the most sensible. There is quite a touch of humour, sometimes even black, in all that God lays on Job.

The message I get from this passage, this time of reading, is ... Ron, if you do nothing else, **face life's realities**. And it is a salutary business.

My parents used to relate the story of a distant second cousin who reached the lofty heights of being sometime Dean of the Cathedral at Hobart. Said cousin is reputed to have conveyed to my grandmother his views on the elevated status of the clergy. My grandmother's response was quite printable, but devastatingly down to earth. 'Lance,' she addressed her proud nephew, 'you are made of the same stuff as the rest of us. And never forget it!' My mild grandmother, bless her soul, was absolutely spot on. Cut him and he bled like the rest of us.

Conversely, we have the picture of Jesus, Who also was made of the same stuff as us. So grandma's words were not so much a put-down as a call to reality. 'Son though He was, he learned obedience through His sufferings.' Being on that level playing-field with us was no 'lowest common denominator: it was rather much a springboard to greater things, even though that greater thing was as Servant. Perhaps even the capital S needs removal. Because He was human, because He was our equal and brother, He is able to be related to, listened to, and responded to, from a free choice from within us. No pressure is exerted, no demand to follow. Simply an offer. No vast ego here at all.

So imagine the angst for Jesus when His 'near4est and dearest' disciples had failed so profoundly to hear, understand and take on board all that He was on about, that they fought over the presumed positions of superiority. Yes, they were all in it, as most unredeemed humans are, for James and John had simply outflanked the others and put their request in first. It was a measure of their profound failure to understand the enormity of all that Jesus was trying to make clear to them. In Jesus' terms, leadership is expressed in service, not in power. And that is something that far too few Christians take on board. Far too humans do, as well.

And that is why so much of the point and purpose of the Faith is missed. It is not because the Faith demands excessive 'belief' or 'faith.' It is because the Gospel requires of us a complete change of direction, not in order to be nice, but in order to be effective, for we have for the rest of the world a means of reconciliation that has far more going for it than the current (July 2006) conflict in Israel and Lebanon, Iraq, East Timor, or even at home.

**Sentence**

The redeemed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing: and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.

*Isaiah 51:11*

**Collect**

O God Whose Son has taught us that love is the fulfilment of Your Law; stir up in us the fire of Your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts Your most excellent gift of love, so that we may love You with our whole being, and our neighbours as ourselves, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

**Old Testament Lesson**

**Job 42: 1 -12a**

**Psalm**

**34: 1 – 8**

**Epistle**

**Hebrews 7: 21 - 28**

**Gospel**

**Mark 10:46 – 52**

**Notes on the Readings**

*Careful readers will notice that I have had the temerity to alter the scope of this Old Testament lesson slightly. It strikes me as important, if a little politically incorrect, to record the Divine comment on the misleading behaviour of Job's comforters. It also includes Job's apparent forgiveness of them. Both seem to me to be salutary matters. However, if I am not forgiven by you, I remain unrepentant.*

**Old Testament Lesson**

You need only to have read my notes on previous Sundays' readings to realize that Job has been important to me. In what amounts to the penultimate stage of the great debate, Job has been confronted with what amounts to his great shortcoming. He had talked about God, He had argued wit God, and now has seen the Almighty almost face to face, and has been brought down to earth very heavily indeed.

While rather too many folk tend to see God only in terms of being their backstop or even private guardian, they finish up with a remarkably distorted picture of the Father, and an even more distorted picture of why He is there. It is only when we *begin* to see God as God, that we start to see ourselves in focus, as we really are. It is a vast but hugely worthwhile experience .....

**Psalm**

**Amazing grace** tends to be a song sung with alarming regularity and an ever more alarming vapidity. The question is 'how does God rescue me from all my troubles,' and the answer tends to be along the lines that God is there. No magic wands; no escape from responsibility. All of life is a learning curve, if we dare, and God is right at the centre of that curve. As it was with Job.

**Epistle**

Perhaps you may follow what is above when you re-read this somewhat strange passage from Hebrews. The old Levitical priests operated, so to speak, by means of ritual, and that meant a certain amount of detachment. Jesus had no such detachment for he was both 'priest and victim' as the old hymn describes the Cross. So the atonement has been made, **but it does not activate automatically or without involvement from you.** God loves and God forgives, but there can be no detachment on our part if we are going to be part of that new life.

**Gospel**

If you think about it, today's Gospel illustrates exactly what has been referred to above. The story of Bartimaeus is a fascinating one, much of the impact lost if you are unaware of the fact that 'Timaeus' tends to translate as 'zilch, nobody, a discard.' And he was 'son of zilch.' Add blindness and you get an absolutely nobody in Hebrew culture then. Disqualified from synagogue, blind and a beggar to boot makes him everybody's nobody. But not for Jesus. Yet he was still required to make considerable contribution to his healing, by **wanting** to reach forward. If you think this is silly, try helping someone who chooses constantly to stay in their comfort zone

however appalling that may be. Jesus never did heal people willy-nilly, but required significant response from them, both towards Himself as well as towards life.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

There are those who, possibly rightly, charge me with being a critical sort of person, not happy with anything less than perfection. As one who is painfully aware of my own lack of that, I do have great difficulty with those who hide behind their imperfections and misperceptions of the Faith to remain static and without growth or progress. Worse still to my mind is the capacity we humans have to present a rather false face to the world.

Perhaps those who annoy me most are those Christians who claim all sorts of intimacy with God and a wide range of blessings and benefits from that, when most of the claims are little more than self-deceptions. My problem is not that this is so, but that a far lesser path has been chosen and something far more valuable has been discarded. It equates, to my small mind, to the present choice of *spin* - an escape for many politicians and others.

For something opposite, take dear old Job. Perhaps it was **because of** the profound difficulty that faced him **demanding** his full attention, he had to be real, and so he finally reached a position of growth, both in faith and as a human. He was prepared, to go way outside his comfort zone to find his answers. He was not going to be satisfied with pat or simple responses to a vast issue. It is often the hard things in life that produce our growth and progress, not the light and easy things. Fluff and nonsense do little to help.

One of the reasons that Job has long been almost an icon for me us, is – as I have shared elsewhere – because the circumstances of life forced me too into the same sort of search as his. The terminal illness of an uncle now nearly 50 years ago began that search, and it was really quite stunning to Uncle and me that someone else had found the same problem so many millennia before us.

There are no easy or simple answers to life, are there! And sometimes the mountain that faces us may feel far too enormous to climb. There is always the fear that there are no answers at all, or that the answers are empty and meaningless. So the risks are enormous, and Job (or rather, whoever wrote the story) would have known that right from the start. Small wonder the arguments in this book seem to go on for ever! Anyhow, as the story runs, Job lost family (except wife who proved to be small help) and wealth, and health. And there seemed to be no reason whatever for the series of disasters, and even less sense in the hideous business of coping with some like shingles.

Contemporary understanding held that illness came as a result of a person's sin, and the extent of the illness was a clear measure of the seriousness of the sin. That was the theory held and pounded home by those euphemistically called 'Job's comforters.' Job's wife was more pragmatic: 'curse God and die!' she demanded, operating on the basis that the sooner it was all over, the easier it would be for everyone. None of these views of the facts held any water for Job, but that would have been what the comforters would have expected. There is nothing so 'bloody' as judgemental people's insistence in taking the moral high ground and pummeling their poor client with their moral and emotional blackmail. I have more than a sneaky suspicion that those comforters would have been delighted if Job came out with a confession of some sordid and secret sin. That sort of person likes that sort of outcome – perhaps it titillates them, gives them some sort of thrill, some sort of vicarious thrill.

Job's apparent refusal to accept such assessments stemmed not from some sense that he was perfect, and not like other people. Job was well aware of his sinfulness, his humanness. But he was just as aware of the fact that nothing he had said, done, or neglected to do got anywhere near the possibility of him being subjected to such a nemesis. His honesty and integrity almost made it harder for him, as is often the case. The real problem for Job was the apparent nonsense it made of life, and of his perception of God. ***It was the nonsense that created the greatest problem.***

Contemporary theology – in Job's day and ours! - can be a huge problem, for rather too much of popular 'theology' stems from poor or limited Biblical understanding or a very narrow and rigid view of things. Or both. I find it strange that, in spite of this book, and the clear statements of Jesus in John 9, that the Book of Common Prayer still had the Service of the Visitation of the Sick. I well remember, as a child, an adult complaining that the priest reading that service over them added to rather than minimised the discomfort.

It may well be necessary for you to read and think this whole book through, but that may be difficult for some. As you might imagine, the argument gets quite convoluted at times, and really does keep going to the point of (modern) boredom. What is more, there is no definitive answer, even at the end of the book. That I find

fascinating, for in real life, the situation is quite the same. *There is no definitive answer*, for that is not the real point. What happened as today's passage from the tale underlines, Job made a huge leap forward. See it in his own words. *I knew of you then only by report, but now I see you with my own eyes. Therefore I yield, repenting in dust and ashes.* It is a stunning outcome, for all (?) that has occurred is a quantum leap forward in Job's perception of God, his understanding of God, his understanding of life.

A personal note here. If that sounds remarkably unsatisfying to any reader, I have to report that for both Uncle and me, that stepping into the shoes of Job was exactly the same for us. There is no reason why! There is something rather more significant than that,

I remember another incident from not quite that many years ago when I was bemoaning the direction that life had taken for me. I was being sorry for myself, and wondering why God had allowed some lousy things to happen to me. And one of my best friends took me to task. "You are asking the wrong question Ron," said that un-theologically trained lay person to me, "and there is no answer to that question. But try asking 'what are you saying to me in this, Lord?'" The words were hardly out of her mouth, and the answer was there in my hands.

Once Job stopped looking inwards, and because of the tirade that the Lord rained and thundered down on him, started to look at the wider picture, he had both the means and direction to move to a far more positive future.

And it can be for you, too!