

Sentence

Jesus said, 'Where two or three are gathered in My Name, I am there among them.'

*Matthew 18:20*

Collect

O God, You know us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: grant us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Exodus 12:1-14**

**PSALM**

**149**

**EPISTLE**

**Romans 13:1-10**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 18:10=20**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

*It may be worth making the comment that Israel was always highly aware of the fact that God was the One Who broke into their history and rescued them from impending disaster. This was so, not just the once at the Exodus, but a number of times through OT history. This awareness was embedded deeply in the Hebrew psyche, and was commemorated annually, and still is. Israel dates its years from the Exodus.*

*So God is never Someone remote from life and reality, but is very much One Who is part and parcel of life, existence and history.*

**Old Testament Lesson**

Right from that time around 1300BC until the present, Jewish people still both celebrate the Exodus and actually date their years from that event. So formative was the Exodus to Judaism, that one could hardly imagine that people and religion without that event. Such are the things that help to make a people who they are. Never lose sight of that fact.

It is important and interesting to note that such a formative event is celebrated and remembered by a MEAL. Also, the meal is closely related to the ordinariness and necessity of life. Without that large meal, the escape from Egypt may well have been hindered by exhausted and weak people.

Aligned with the celebratory meal is that rather ghastly parallel of the challenge to the gods of Egypt. The Passover and its somewhat ugly elements are a reminder to us in this now post-gentle age that life is, more often than not, very bloody indeed and there is small room for anything less than practicality.

I wonder if present readers have ever made the clear and Biblical connection between Passover and Eucharist. Moderns will miss much of the point if such a connection is not made.

**Psalm**

There are a couple of interesting points to be made as this Psalm is read in conjunction with the Readings before and after. First of all, there is great delight to be had in celebrating a God Who rescues His people, for without that, life is not possible. There is a second aspect here that underlines something else about the Judaic-Christian Faith, where God is seen as the guarantor of all that is true, just and responsible. To get caught up in the old perception of Divine judgement and punishment is to miss the point also. What is the real issue? That humanity is responsible for its action and inactions, and that life will always have that capacity of bringing nemesis down on human evil. It is a fact of life; it is a facet of God.

## Epistle

Here I suspect some will find me quite naughty, and before you turn off, please stop and think.

One of the fascinating aspects of Judaism and Christianity is the underlying (but often forgotten) recognition that life and faith is ever in constant development. (May I dare call it 'evolution?') More of this anon. It is always important to notice that the Biblical revelation was in constant development. At this point in his life and ministry, St. Paul obviously saw the Empire as basically benevolent. If this sounds odd to the modern mind, it is worth noting that one of the things that seemed a constant threat to 'civilization as we know it' was the possibility of invasion of Vandals or others that would render life impossible and chaotic. The opening verses of the first Creation Story underline this when it speaks of the abyss, *chaos*. The Old Testament and New has fairly regular reference to such a threat, and so government of ANY SORT was seen as some sort of Divine defence against chaos. Even bad government was seen to be better than none. And remember that 'democracy' was a Greek invention and idea, and not a Biblical one.

By the time St. John wrote *Revelation*, there was quite something of a move away from that view. While we may not have been touched with the Nero experience and the pathological persecutions that followed, those of that day were! While the troubles may have been sporadic, they were also very ugly indeed, and rendered a review of the attitude of support.

In our own day and age, it needs to be said that Christians are very much part of the community and country, and need to make their contribution both taxwise and otherwise. Separation from community is NOT an option. It is in the real world that *love is the fulfilling of the Law*.

## Gospel

Recently, I had an interesting 'deep and meaningful' with one of the guys in the Prison Bible Study – as he was repenting somewhat of his criminal past, and wondering quite how he was caught up in quite a vicious world. More often than not, we tend to forget that sin consists, very largely, in refusing the brotherhood of our fellows, and seeing them as steps to tread on to gain whatever ends we have in mind. Their value is discounted, and our desires and goals become 'divine.' It is described significantly in the Genesis 3 story where the temptations to be 'be like gods.' Whatever shade this superiority takes, it remains damaging and eventually demonic – to use the Biblical term.

Our Lord was always at great pains to show how different God was to such damaging expectations. For Him, each person is of inestimable value, and that is how we ought to regard each other. Even in that matter of resolving differences, the process needs to be fair, with each side listening to the other.

And what is most surprising of all, in this last paragraph, Jesus went on to make the astounding statement that, when you boil it all down, mere humans are capable of seeing things 'in the God way.' What is even more delightful is in that last phrase, which indicates clearly again that God is less concerned about big numbers than He is about genuine and true response to Him.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

While this ground has been covered before, it is helpful, I suspect, to look at it again. As any educationist will suggest, learning is best accomplished when the teacher starts from the pupils' *knowns* before moving on to fresh territory.

It was only a couple of months ago or so, when the world was debating the outcome of the G8 Summit in Scotland. The cry was for the relief of huge national debts in countries that could least afford them. The call was magnificent, and culminated in the repeat of the Band Aid concert thing – the Live 8. I do not know how many millions were raised for the cause, and I am not asking how this vast amount was expended. But I do draw attention to the news reports that quite a number of the artists who took part in the effort demanded enormous sums for their participation. How easily the most altruistic human efforts become distorted by the battle of human egos.

What sort of a world do we live in? Truly, now. No pulling the wool over your eyes. Is not the general approach to life in our culture (if it can grace such a name) is summed up in that constant and

annoying L'Oreal advert, '*because you are worth it.*' While there remain lots of people who see beyond sheer selfish pursuits and goals, an increasing number are rather self-focussed.

It shows up in all sorts of ways, and even in this working class area, people seem to expect the absolute best, and preferably without the slightest effort on their part. 'It is my right!' is the catch cry, and there are few who seem either capable or interested in looking for some balance in this drive for self-fulfillment.

Whilst it has to be said that some ambition is helpful, the process of which I speak tends to be so myopic as to see no further than oneself. I can recall being a builder's labourer 50 or more years ago, and even then was aware that any rise in my pay meant that someone else had to cover the cost. Inflation in the '50s was rampant, and few were prepared to see that much of the cause of it was sheer human greed.

In other words, if I am going to get on, it is of great damage if that process is going to be at your cost. Today's obscene executive salaries have to be paid by someone, and such someones are people regarded as rather lower in the scheme of things than the executive.

It is not only salaries that illustrate the process; the lousy human capacity for looking down on others is a very damaging process, like bullying or other violent responses. If one were to look at the grounds for such superiority, almost always it would be seen as absolutely groundless. In fact, the 'victim' may well be the better person.

All this long hard look at the way we relate to each other is not designed to make us feel guilty; it is designed to enhance the community and culture in which we live. None of us is so important as to be able to demand far superior benefits from being alive. And certainly none of us can hold up our heads when we live in a culture that talks about equality, but does so very little to enable it.

**Sentence**

If You, O Lord, should note what we do wrong, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, so that You may be revered  
*Psalm 130:3-4*

**Collect**

O God, without You, we are not able to please You: mercifully grant that Your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts, through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Exodus 14: 19 – 31**

**PSALM**

**114**

**EPISTLE**

**Romans 14:1- 14**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 18: 21 – 35**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

*Old Testament*

One of the things that we learn from how human history is written, is that the history tends to be written by the victors, and that the story tends to be somewhat embellished. This does not mean, necessarily, that such things as the Exodus never happened! It does mean that some of the detail may be a little questionable.

But, like the Anzac legend, that hugely formative event for Israel led themselves to see themselves in a strong new light. And like Anzac, the reality of the event was – let’s face it – rather ugly, as a whole army was wiped out. Today’ attitude to such things is understandably reticent, but in the gung-ho past, such tales were lapped up with great glee.

The real point of the issue is the rescue of slaves, and helpless slaves at that. And that is the point of the saga – God is a God Who rescues His people, as He has a special task for them. It is useful to remember that whereas Exodus tends to portray a vast number of people, the reality would have been otherwise. God is never on the side of the big battalions.

*Psalm*

Here, for the modern reader, is a funny little psalm that seems to have not a great deal to say except to rejoice in one of Israel’s escapes. But I wonder if the modern reader is game to enter into what I understand is a very Jewish way of expressing things.

While modern Christians may celebrate the Exodus as an example of the activity of a God Who rescues His people when all else seems lost, I suspect that the Hebrew response to the event was an expression of the justice of it all. Israel had been enslaved, and was set for extinction. This, for no other reason than Egyptians then were not prepared to accept the perceived threat on their eastern border.

In Jewish legend, the sea was and remained a symbol of evil, so that when the sea was ‘beaten,’ then truth and justice was the victor. *For sheer interests’ sake, notice John’s use of this imagery in his Revelation. Even the sea of glass before the throne of God was the reservoir of human evil.*

**Epistle**

There were many issues that had the capacity to tear the Infant Church apart, and many of those issues stemmed from the fact that the Church was made up of a mixture of Jewish people, and all manner of folk of other religions or none. Even in today’s world, there is a wide range of disparate views about all sorts of things, so there should be no surprise about life then.

As in most human arenas, there is that terrible capacity for some people to find any way of expressing some sort of superiority over others. One issue then was of meat offered to idols, or rituals

concerning certain days. The former issue raised problems for some, which is not surprising when you realize that you bought your meat, not from butcher shops but from temples. So if you bought your meat from a pagan temple, there were those ready to align you with the god of that temple, or to show your failure to be true to Christ.

It is interesting to note that Paul's main charge in such situations was to call people to consider the other person's views and convictions. As an outcome of that, was the significant observation that humans in community need each other, depend on each other, and need to take each other into consideration in all that they do.

Mind you, notice that this passage ends with another significant statement from St. Paul 'that nothing is unclean in itself.' Here lies a maturity that is rarely reflected in hostile people's assessment of what the Faith is about.

## **GOSPEL**

This story in the Gospel ought to be well-enough known for it even to need little in the way of explanation. However, in this day and age of inflated egos the whole matter of forgiveness is hugely important. It is a sad commentary on today's world that forgiveness is down-graded as a means of reconciliation.

The story hardly needs comment, for although the illustration seems to be over-stated, the reality is not. We humans do have a great capacity for seeing something done to us as important, but something we do as insignificant. Forgiveness is of huge value in offering people-in-conflict a way forward, but it does need to be the double-edged sword, operating in both directions and with both sides of the conflict.

## **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

Stop me if you have heard this tale before, but it is an important one, requiring fairly significant response from all Christians.

I have long been concerned at the way in which so many Christians of all sorts of denominations take this business of God's forgiveness of them far, far too lightly, and only take hold of that part of the process that affects them personally. The way in which forgiveness is presented as a free gift misses rather too much of the reality. *If you find it hard to read on, then please do.*

It was some years ago now that the young daughter of a pastor was murdered, in a most ugly incident. After the dust had settled, the pastor – obviously considering it to be his Christian duty – made it clear to all and sundry that he forgave the murderer, It was a stunning, if silly, response to the murder, and I felt it almost incumbent on me to write to the man and ask him to think his theology through further. I did not, and feel partly responsible for that man's subsequent breakdown and dereliction from the Faith, for that impossible attempt destroyed him. And why? Because he, like many others, had a folkloric understanding of what it means to forgive. In fact they have small idea of the process.

The assumption many people make is that forgiveness comes freely because Jesus has died for us. And that is true; but a simple statement like that is only part of the truth. I may enrage some by questioning the 'popular' theology that Jesus took our punishment, for that view misses the point too.

Under what grounds and on what basis does God forgive you? It is no blanket forgiveness, be assured. Look quite closely at both the Scriptures and the Cross to see that the first and prior requirement on the part of the sinner seeking forgiveness is **repentance**. For me to repent, it is important for that to include (a) my recognition of failure and fault, and to take responsibility for those actions, and (b) the expressed determination not to travel down that path again. I need to see, take hold of and bear the responsibility for the hurt I have caused. God forgives only when repentance is involved. I have to take me and my sin and failure seriously. While I cannot change the past, it does offer you, the one sinned against, the reality of me seeing my fault and confessing it.

The problem for the pastor of the story is that his offer of forgiveness was tendered regardless of any sign of change or repentance by the perpetrator. There was nothing to hang that offer of forgiveness on, for, as far as I know, to this day there has been no one charged with the murder. *Forgiveness is a very serious business.*

When it comes to the Cross, please think through what follows:

If I do you some damage, there is a gulf that grows between us. Regardless of the attitude of hurt and hate, or even of possible softness between us, there is a sensitivity that cannot be dealt with by soft soap. It will take one or both of us to cross the divide and with good will, let's face it. From your side, there will be a tentativeness about it, fearing failure of the process. On my part, a similar sense of failure will come because I am not sure that you will be fair dinkum about the forgiveness.

All I can offer is apology. Serious apology or repentance. (Did you know that the Greek word that is translated 'repent' is metanoia – change of mind. It is not being sorry, for that is shallow. It is determination to operate quite differently.) But that is as far as I can go. I cannot change the past, and I cannot rebuild the bridge. *Only you can do that.*

IF, and it is a huge if, you are prepared to take the matter further, you will accept my apology and repentance, and forgive. It may well NOT be because you feel forgiving, but because you determine to forgive. Forgiveness is NOT an emotion but a decision. And forgiveness is nothing less than your determination to turn your back on your right to retaliate. Ponder that, please, because right there is the profound nature of forgiveness laid bare.

Do you begin to catch sight of the reality. If I damage you, you pay the price for it twice over. First, in my initial attack on you, and second, in your rejection of retaliation to balance the ledger. **And that is what the Cross is saying. FORGIVENESS ALWAYS HURTS THE FORGIVER FAR MORE THAN IT HURTS THE FORGIVEE.** And that is what Jesus has done – making it quite clear that the process is a very costly one, especially for the one who forgives. But it is not a destructive one. I do not get away scot-free. I have to take you seriously and valuably.

The real point of the joy of the Christian Faith is that this forgiveness business is a real and effective possibility. For much of human life and culture, no such relief valve is available. And without forgiveness, there is only a stark and sterile range of relationships possible.

THANK GOD FOR FORGIVENESS .....

**Sentence**

By grace you have been saved through faith: and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God  
*Ephesians 2;8-9*

**Collect**

Loving Father, Whose Son Jesus Christ has taught us that what we do for the least of these our brothers and sisters, we also for Him: give us the will to be the servant of others, as He was the Servant of all, Who gave up His life and died for us, yet lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever  
**Amen**

**OLD TESTAMENT LESSON**

**Exodus 16: 2 – 25**

**PSALM**

**105; 1-6, 37-45**

**EPISTLE**

**Philippians 1: 21 - 30**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 20: 1 – 16**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament Lesson**

Although most of these OT stories are well-known by most Christians, there is always the possibility that we assume that knowing of them means understanding them – and that can be somewhat incorrect.

The story of the feeding of the multitude has always been a huge feature of Jewish history and psyche, and the role of Moses as being almost everything to the People is well to the forefront. But modern readers need to keep an overall focus, for it was our Lord Who took matters rather further indeed. His sign of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is the sequel to end all sequels. And in his Gospel, John takes the story to its logical conclusion. The contrast between Moses' provision of 'just enough for each day' and Jesus' twelve baskets left over, lead quite logically into John's soliloquy about the Eucharist. God will always feed His people, though not with what they want, necessarily.

**Psalm**

Here is yet another psalm that underlines the hugely formative effect that the Exodus had on Israel and its understanding of itself. God is a God Who breaks into human history and makes Himself known in that sort of experience. There is also that underlying assurance to which Israel turned constantly, that God will always act in terms of the patriarchal promise, oft repeated.

**Epistle**

For the sake of simplicity, the portion of the Epistle chosen today omits the first 20 verses.

It is an interesting insight into how Paul felt at what would have amounted to towards the end of his long ministry. He is content to be of service to his people, even if that meant no 'long rest' for him at that stage. And that is the attitude he sought to instill in the Philippian Christians – for it is as the People of God live truly that God becomes rather more clearly visible through their open and honest attitudes.

**GOSPEL**

I often draw people's attention to the root meaning of the word 'holy,' for most people seem to have a rather jaundiced view. It does not mean religious, and certainly not in the traditional turgid sense. In reality, 'holy' has a root meaning of 'different,' and that difference shows up loud and clear in today's Gospel.

There would be very few union members who would go along happily with the payment rates in today's tale. For many of us there is a gross imbalance for the long workers over the latecomers. However, the real point of the story is not that imbalance, but the recognition on the part of the employer that each family and each person needed enough payment to keep going for another day.

The usual terms of employment then, a man was paid at the end of each day, for the work he had done that day. All this meant that the lady of the household would have enough for the family to eat and survive another day. Had that employer withheld the full day's pay, then there would have been a number of starving people. The nature of the difference referred to above has to do with taking all the circumstances of all parties involved, and acting accordingly and with compassion.

It goes without saying that here is an enormous challenge, for in our Western culture, the goal of employment and payment is to make sure that I get ahead of you. I am important not you. And that is part of the huge difference that being holy (in the true sense of the word) makes a person. It becomes painfully obvious that Jesus' sense of 'holiness' is to operate on the basis that my brother and sister, whoever they are, are my brother and sister, and that my concern and interest must be as strong for them as it is for myself.

## NOTES FOR A SERMON

It is not so easy these days for people to assume that everything to do with Jesus is bland and namby-pamby! The old 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' has, fortunately passed from view and attitude. However, there is still some distance for us to go, in realizing the extent to which Jesus was radical, and often way off to the left in His views of the value of people.

Perhaps it is only when we stop again and realize that the practical<sup>1</sup> reason for the crucifixion was that those who led Israel and the Empire of that day would not tolerate the radical views of that 'upstart of a teacher.' Jesus' strong view of what is true and what is not, what is just and what is not, and what is important and what is not, led to the determination of those leaders to get rid of Him.

So much of all that Jesus said and did ran so very contrary to the general perceptions and views of the day. Jesus' concern for the downtrodden is well-enough known, His views on women less well recognized. When it came to people beyond the pale, like lepers, Gentiles and others, He was remarkably radical and far beyond most of His contemporaries. And when it came to other matters, like what we would call union matters these days, He was so far beyond any 'normal' way of thinking that it still takes us a lot of effort to catch up to Him.

You can see it coming, I imagine. It is this whole business of being holy, and even of holiness itself. For rather too long, this approach to life has been packaged as being 'other-worldly'<sup>2</sup> – like a hermit or a nun, cut off from real life, and leading a totally spiritual life. The ideal is seen as cut off from normality, with head in the clouds, and feet a mile off the ground. Please consider this as a challenge to that accepted, and quite unrealistic view.

Holy, as mentioned in the notes above, means 'different.' But that *different* does not mean 'off with the fairies!' It means different from the usual, normal human default mode that we expect from each other, and that we expect to hand out to others.

One of the hugely important gifts that Jesus came to bring, (and far too few recognize this) is a way of living, a *modus operandi* that is very different to the normal (fallen) human one. He gives us an alternative way to operate than the one epitomized in the Adam of Genesis Chapter 3. It may be best to bring that out of the woodwork, too.

If there is one thing that we can expect from many directions these days, it is the lack of truth, it is the lack of honesty, it is very often a violent and destructive response. On the wide screen, we see horrific things in Iraq; on the local scene we find all manner of spin and avoidance of truth, and the outcome tends to be a need to be alert to all manner of scam. Distrust is the outlook. In the Genesis story, the nature of sin is revealed as wanting to be 'like God,' usurping God's place and demanding other people fit our view of what values should be. It is self driven, and ultimately self-destructive.

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<sup>1</sup> Dare I call it 'political' without calling a cyclone down on myself?

<sup>2</sup> And so it is in a way – but notice in what particular way!

It is against that backdrop that Jesus pointed to a far more creative, if risky, way to live. There was nothing all that new about it, for even the ancient Shema had expressed it: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength, and your neighbour as yourself. And Jesus dared to point out quite where that love of neighbour takes us. This is no soft-soap alternative, but a completely new and creative way of operating.

One of the points at which this new way shows up as radically different is in the parable under review today. It is the tale of the workers in the vineyard, or more particularly, of the owner of the vineyard. Almost all of the accepted values of working seem to be confronted with a greater sense of value for the person. A denarius was a day's pay; it was one that enabled the worker and his family to survive for another day. --- and that may help us see what the expression in the Lord's Prayer means. Properly translated, that 'give us each day ....' reads 'give us today our bread for tomorrow' The stunning thing about the owner in the parable is that, being aware of the fact that each of those men and their families depended on a full day's pay, that is what the employer gave, regardless of the length of time that they worked that day.

So please note that the point of the parable is the need to take care, over and above the call of duty, I guess one could say. The remarkable extreme to which the employer went was to disregard his own rights, and be caring of the needs of others. It does not take much imagination to realize how distant such an approach is, compared to the usual 'blow you, Jack, I'm all right.' This little cameo leaves a lot of room for our imagination to extend into all sorts of areas where this caring could and should extent.

**Sentence**

Come. Let us return to the Lord, that we may live before Him.

*Hosea 6:1*

**Collect**

O God, You declare Your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant us such a measure of Your grace, that, running in 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**

**Exodus 17: 1 - 7**

**PSALM**

**78:1-4 & 11-16**

**EPISTLE**

**Philippians 2: 1- 13**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 21: 23 – 32**

**NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**Old Testament**

It did not take long for me, all those years ago, to get past the Sunday School attitude to these stories, which meant strong focus on the miracles. My point is a simple if oft-misunderstood one. That is, if the miracle is to be the focus of attention, there is no way of going any further ahead than that, if you follow me. For instance, I have never been much good at producing miracles myself, or even of being an instrument of God in such things. So if that is the focus, then there is little more than a 'no through road' in them.

On the other hand, if the reader is expected to enter more into the story, then rather more can be gained. While hindsight is a facile tool, it has to be said that the Israelites' strong capacity to 'grumble against the Lord' is something terribly easy to follow. And that is something that helps me to grow. Grumbling tends to stem from a perception that God is there to smooth out the probs and make life easy for me. If that is my expectation of the Lord, then He will take some delight in disappointing me. It is not hard to see what happens to spoilt kids! And God is not into spoiling us, for that takes us in the opposite direction to maturity.

*And that is something that I need to reflect upon CONSTANTLY.*

**Psalm**

Now I am almost tempted to say, in response to this Psalm, 'I rest my case' in the comments above. One of the huge delights in this experience of God, is that it is in life experiences that God tends to make Himself known. And if I try and shift the blame onto someone or something else, I will miss the lesson entirely.

**Epistle**

If you have 'heard' me before on this passage, you may switch off. Otherwise, come exploring with me please.

I am fairly sure that if this is all we had of the New Testament, it would be sufficient for us to catch sight of what it is all about. Mind you, one would need to read imaginatively.

Here, Paul is not being soft or nice either about Jesus or about Gospel, but is telling it like it is. But the reader needs to know and understand the Creation Stories, too. What constitutes the greater part of this passage is a huge contrast between 'Adam' and Christ. For 'Adam' read and understand the word to mean 'humanity.' To put it another way, Jesus in His life and ministry operated in direct contrast and contradistinction to the way most (all?) humans operate. The story of the Fall in Genesis 3 points up that the

basic nature of sin is my determination to ignore the real God and set myself up in His place. 'You shall be like gods (God)' says it all. That means that I usurp the position of control of you, demanding that you fit my pattern of who you should be. I am the Boss and you had better believe it!

Jesus operated in total contradistinction to that mode of operation, He was – and remains – Servant, because that is the only way that even we humans can operate and co-operate – as servants of each other. It is the mode necessary for reconciliation, it is the self-giving so totally contrary to the usual human pattern. In other words, part of the Gospel, so often ignored by most of its participants, is that we all need to operate like Jesus, for that is the alternative that He offers us.

### **GOSPEL**

It might be a sign of my advancing age, but one of the things that seems to hit me between the eyes constantly is the regular pattern of Jesus Who was for ever – quietly but powerfully, - requiring His opponents to respond to the realities. In other words, He required them to react to the truth, and not to hide behind all sorts of spin, baloney and escapism.

One of the things the Judaism seemed always to require of anyone who stepped out of the traditional line was to demand where their authority came from. It was a brow-beating process, like those today who have no real answer but filibuster. Obviously, Jesus was not intimidated by such a process, but simply replied by asking His antagonists to react to what He and they knew to be the truth.

Notice the process by which those 'chief priests and elders' tried to find a way of answering Jesus. Surely the moment they began that deviant process, it must have been clear to them that they were determined to find a way around the obvious truth. They were dead already. There is an almost comical side to Jesus' challenge to them, for He would have known exactly the sort of diversionary tactics they would employ.

The final paragraph of today's passage is a telling one. What is really being said is that the very people most likely to avoid any close look at themselves were, in fact, far more open and honest than the religious leaders. This is not the only time when such a surprising reversal of expectation occurs: what is your experience in such things?

### **NOTES FOR A SERMON**

It was a number of years ago now, and the story concerns a nephew of mine who was being inducted as an Assistant Pastor in one of the charismatic Churches in another State to this. My brother-in-law and several of his family, not charismatics, attended, and were very surprised indeed at some of the indications made quite clear in that service. Not least of these was the repeated strong expression that the Head Pastor was Boss, was the determinator of each and everything, and everyone else had better believe it. While this illustration refers to one particular denomination, the attitude is certainly not limited to that group.

There are rather too many Christians who are quite happy to see Jesus as Servant, Good Shepherd and all that gentle stuff, and then go on to assume that if they have any sort of leadership role in the Church, then 'they are Boss' and you better not forget it. All of this in spite of the repeated expression, from Old Testament to New that the Messiah would be Servant, not Dominator.

I have often said that, had the New Testament been limited to Philippians 2, then we would still have enough clear picture of Gospel. Mind you, there question still remains: do you see and understand what Paul is saying?

Jesus did not think equality with God something to be grasped. So who did? And the answer is Adam of Genesis 3. The grasping at equality with God is really the thing that constitutes sin – but think that through a little too. If I am equal with God, then .... watch out. I can run your life, tell you what to do and demand that you do it. I can be the control freak, the power broker, the person who runs you from beginning to end. And you do not have to look too far to see how this process works (if that can be said to be true) in ordinary life. It is that destructive process which seems to envelop almost every human activity, and render

life very stressful and damaging. I know better than you, so I make your decisions for you, and by that means I emasculate you, dehumanize you, reduce you to a number, a shadow of what you could otherwise be.

And there, and almost there alone, is the reason that Jesus is Servant, the One Who empties Himself, and Who offers Himself. This is not because it is a nice thing to do; it is because it is the only possible *modus operandi* that offers everyone a future, everyone a maturity, everyone a warm and loving atmosphere in which to live and learn and grow. Certainly it is a risky path to travel, because I might just turn my back on this offer and do may damnedest to make a mess of it still. But part of the difficulty of being a servant, small 's' or large, is that the only way to free someone to choose life is to give them the same freedom to choose otherwise.

If you would then point me to the end of this panegyric where it talks about Jesus being exalted, and ask about that? I would simply answer what Paul is saying is that this is the path God has always operated on, and it is the Servant path that Jesus chose that underlines God's enormous wisdom, love and redemptive actions. Jesus is now and will ever be Servant. And His people need to echo the same attitudes, as Paul says when he began to write this passage.

Neither my life nor my ministry reflects the nature of Jesus, of Gospel of God, unless and until I operate as a servant. While people may see this as ridiculous and dangerous, I can only underline the fact that, with this Gospel of reconciliation, there is no other path possible, or effective, or redemptive. And in that I am content.